

Shatter: Spiral Into the Unknown {Part II} by midas_touch_of_angst

Series: [Shatter \(Stranger Things\) \[2\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Action/Adventure, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - Modern with Magic, Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers, F/M, Flashbacks, Gay Will Byers, Gen, Lots of Lead-Up to Part III, Lots of Mileven Fluff, Mostly Fluff but with some in-between Angst, Mystery, Panic Attacks, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Superheroes, Update: Graphic Depictions of Violence warning for Chapter Twenty exclusively, vigilantes

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Erica Sinclair, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Dustin Henderson & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Dustin Henderson & Mike Wheeler, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Kali Prasad, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Lucas Sinclair, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Erica Sinclair & Lucas Sinclair, Jonathan Byers & Will Byers, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Erica Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler & Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers & Dustin Henderson, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers & Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

Four Years after forming a superhero team, the Party is still trying their best to make their city better and safer. However, when a mysterious girl shows up with even more mysterious powers, causing chaos wherever she goes, the Party takes it upon themselves to track her down and figure out what her motivation is. What they didn't expect was the fact that she would do anything to keep them from finding out.

Superhero AU, Part two of a three-part series. Updates daily from 3:00-4:00.

Part I {Pirouette in the Dark}: https://archiveofourown.org/works/13575153?view_full_work=true

Part III {Break the Glass}: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/14340432/chapters/33096699>

Rated Teen and Up for Swearing and Violence.

1. El and Mike are the Cutest Couple

Notes for the Chapter:

QUICK NOTE: If you haven't read Part I, this will probably confuse you a LOT. Here's a link to Part I, "Pirouette in the Dark": https://archiveofourown.org/works/13575153?view_full_work=true

And yes, my titles are coming from lyrics from "Shatter Me". I basically listen to that song on repeat while writing.

CHAPTER ONE

El and Mike are the Cutest Couple

Mike heard a knock on the window.

He put down his book, instantly knowing who it was. He supposed that most kids would freak out if they heard a knock on their window at 11:55 at night, but he knew that knock. It was a series of taps, a secret code that they'd developed between themselves, to let him know that it was her.

So he opened the window, and El floated into his room.

She dropped on his bed, groaning. "Flying is *hard*!"

"Shh!" Mike said, glancing out the window before shutting it. "You don't want my Mom to hear you! If she finds out I have a girl in my room at night, it doesn't matter how cool you are, she'll *flip* her shit!"

"Don't *worry*, she's probably asleep. It's late." El shrugged, sitting up and smiling at him, her long, brown curls falling over her shoulders. It was so much longer than it had been when they'd met.

Mike sat next to her, instinctively grabbing her hand. "What's

wrong?”

El gave him a hesitant smile. “Nothing. Just wanted to see you.”

“Uh-huh. So you snuck away from your Dad and Sister, ran through the streets at night, and floated yourself up to my window just to say ‘hi’ without calling first.” Mike gave her a look. “Come on, you can talk to me. What’s wrong?”

El glanced to the clock- 11:57- and then said, “Well... tomorrow’s our anniversary.”

“Our...” Oh.

He remembered the date now. November 6 was tomorrow. It would be four years, then. Four years since El had broken out of the Lab, and run into him in the woods, and he’d biked her home and hidden her in his closet until they found a safe place.

“Are you okay?” he asked again, gripping her hand a little tighter. “Did you have a nightmare? Do you need-”

El blocked off his words with a quick kiss. He froze at that, only able to stare in wonder at her face as she pulled away, a beautiful smile spread across her face. Even after *four* years, he couldn’t believe how perfect she was.

“Nothing’s wrong.” she said, and he believed her. “I just wanted you to be the first person I see tomorrow.”

Oh, God, he loved her so much.

“Has it actually been four years?” he asked, turning to face the clock, watching as it counted down. “We were *twelve*. Can you believe that?”

“I was Eleven.”

“No, I thought you were-” It took Mike a second to catch on, and then he laughed. “Wow, okay.”

El laughed, too, though Mike did see her pull her sweater sleeve a

little farther down, to cover her wrist. She was still sensitive about the tattoo, even now, but apparently not sensitive enough to joke about it now.

“Still,” Mike changed the subject slightly, “We were so young. So were the others.”

“I had no friends.” El said. “Even then, I thought Eight was dead. And now I have six friends.”

“And now I’ve got you.” Mike said, and El smiled up at him, leaning her head on her shoulder.

They both watched the clock some more: it was flashing 11:59. They kept staring in silence, until the numbers changed to 12:00.

“Happy anniversary.” El said quietly.

“Happy anniversary.” he replied.

After a second, he noticed that the room was a little dark. He hesitated, and then held out his hand. Some light strands extended from it, flickering across their faces. It was small, but it was enough. Enough light for them to see each other. He hesitated, and then let the strands turn into a heart shape. The two of them giggled for a while, grinning to them.

“I should probably go.” El sighed, and Mike clenched his fist, letting the light disappear. “If they wake up and find out I’m gone, I’m gonna be in so much shit.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“Of course.” El smirked, standing up and moving to the window, opening it and glancing down to the ground. “Same time as always.”

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

“I can handle myself.” She turned to give him one last look.

“Noted.” Mike smiled, and watched El drop away from the window.

God, he was so lucky to have her in his life.

“Grab my hand.”

It was September, the September after El had come back to them. Mike looked up from his book, as El held out her hands, waiting for him to grab on. They’d been sitting outside of Castle Byers, waiting for the others to finish reorganizing the books.

“I’ve been trying something.” she’d said. “I want to try with you.”

“Oh?” Mike put the book down, grabbing her hands.

El grinned, pulling him a little farther into the trees. “It’s been safe so far, but I’ve never done it with two people, so...”

“So this is only kinda safe?”

El nodded.

“Well,” Mike shrugged, “So’s everything else we do.”

What he meant to say was, “I trust you.”

She knew that as well as he did.

She shut her eyes a little, and Mike gasped as their feet lifted off the ground. He moved his arms, wrapping around her in a tight hug. El hesitated, stopping their ascent a second, and then he said, “It’s okay. It’s okay, go ahead.”

El lifted them again, and suddenly, they were above the trees- only slightly, not enough to get spotted by someone outside the forest. Mike opened his eyes, and gasped, looking down.

Most people would’ve been scared by the height. But Mike just saw the way the sun dappled onto the leaves, the way the wind blew through the trees, how beautiful the world looked beneath them, and all he could do was stare.

He slowly turned, looking towards El, whose hair was just long enough to blow around in the breeze, flapping into her face a little.

“Do you like it?” she asked. She’d wanted to tell him a lot more, about how she’d figured out how to do more than levitate, about how she’d learned to fly wherever she wanted, about how she could fly them anywhere they wanted, anywhere. But, well, she could tell him that later.

Right now, they were just floating.

“It’s amazing.” Mike had said, and that had been enough for now.

Only a few minutes after El jumped out of Mike’s window on their fourth year anniversary, a girl got a call.

She opened her phone, saying, “This better be good. It’s midnight.”

“We’ve got our first target.” said her contact.

The girl hesitated, and then jumped up. “Should I go now?”

“Yes. But just for reconnaissance. Don’t destroy it quite yet.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because then they’ll know that we know where they are. Come *on*.”

“We’ve done this before. They’ve gotta know we’re coming for them.”

“This town’s different, and you know it. You know who’s here.”

The girl hesitated, and then said, “Alright. Alright, I’m on it. But I want that place gone as fast as possible.”

She hung up and sighed, and then held out her hands.

If she was sneaking off in the middle of the night, she was going to have to transform.

Dustin's phone buzzed, and he groaned and sat up.

"For the love of fuck, Lucas," he muttered, rubbing his eyes and trying to sit up. "I don't want to hear your late-night thoughts on the fucking Disney sequels again."

The phone buzzed again, and Dustin suddenly realized that it wasn't a text from a sleep-deprived friend.

He immediately jumped up, grabbing the phone. A notification came up- one that wasn't from an app, but from a supercomputer underneath a cabin in the woods.

And what he saw completely shocked him.

New powered individual spotted in area.

"Oh, God." he muttered.

They needed to have a meeting tomorrow.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, so, here's my heads-up info for this fic:

- As mentioned in Part I, a lot of chapters were intended to include more flashbacks, which eventually become, well, Part I. So if any chapters seem short... that's why. However, this won't restrict Part II like it did Part I, as I won't have missing scenes or anything.
- Once again, as mentioned in Part I, I did a lot of research for this, including looking up other Superhero AUs to make sure they weren't too similar. This also included research on how to accurately write PTSD. Should any of my portrayals of PTSD, PTSD Flashbacks and Anxiety/Panic Attacks be wrong or accidentally offensive, PLEASE let me know so I can fix it.
- While Parts I and II will be exclusively "Stranger

things", the plan is for Part III to be a crossover with the 2017 film version of Stephen King's "It".

- Part II will be MUCH shorter than Part I (and probably III). We'll be lucky if we get to 30 chapters here, let alone 41!

- Have to admit, Part II is mostly setup for Part III, and it will be a bit more mystery-oriented than Part I, which was an Origin Story.

- Thank you all for reading my fic! Love you! :D

~ Midas

2. The Party are Teenagers and have the corresponding Senses of Humor

CHAPTER TWO

The Party are Teenagers and have the corresponding Senses of Humor

Mike bounced on his heels outside the door of the small house. The Hoppers only just moved in a few years ago; the apartment apparently “got too big” for two powered teenagers. El *loved* it, enjoying the amount of space she had. When he visited, Mike sometimes felt a little sad, not that he’d tell El; he used to live in a house like that, before the accident...

The door opened, and he came face-to-face with Kali.

She blinked down at him, her normal, blank expression on her face, and then she said, “You’re here for Jane?”

It took Mike a second to remember that was her legal name, but once he did, he nodded quietly.

“Come on in, she’s still getting ready.” Kali said, and Mike quickly entered the house, kicking off his shoes onto the carpet and glancing up the staircase that led upstairs. She would come down those stairs pretty soon.

“So,” Kali said, leaning against the wall and crossing her arms. “Where are you going? For your date?”

Mike’s face went red at the mention of the “date”- *we’ve been dating three years, why are you still embarrassed?*- but he said, “We’re just going to the theater. See that new musical movie.”

“Well, you’ll have to tell me about it when you get back.” Kali said, and Mike could definitely read between the lines: she was *actually* saying, *I will want all the details so I know that you actually went to the theater.*

“How’s... how’s school?” Mike asked.

Kali gave him a look. She and El were homeschooled, he knew, and he also knew that Kali didn’t like having to catch up on so much, especially since while on the run, she’d assumed she wouldn’t ever have to do school again. And she wasn’t super excited about not being able to go to College like the other kids her age, though she was a bit concerned at the idea of leaving El for further education.

“Same as always.” she shrugged.

They heard a sound from upstairs, and looked to see El racing down the staircase, a loose bag slung over her shoulder and a simple t-shirt and jeans thrown on. She was tying her hair into a ponytail as she ran, and she finally reached the landing once she got her hair out of the way. “Hey, Mike!” she said, grinning. “Ready to go?”

“Hold on!” That voice was from Chief Jim Hopper, who walked in from another room, glancing at the teens in the hall. “Who’s going where, again?”

“Mike and I are going to the theater.” El said, smiling brightly. “And then we’re going to Lunch, and meeting up with the Party.”

“And I’ll stay here, in my room, studying.” Kali said.

“Okay, you know the rules.” Hopper said, directing his words at El and Mike. “No rushing into danger, call if anything happens, and if any of that superhero shit goes down-”

“Yes, we *know*.” El rolled her eyes, grabbing Mike’s hand. “Come on, let’s go, we’ll miss the movie!”

“Have fun, Jane.” Kali said, as El opened the door.

“See you tonight!” El said.

“Uh, bye!” Mike waved as El shut the door behind them.

As soon as the door was closed, El sighed. “God, I love them, but I can handle myself!”

"They're just worried." Mike shrugged, grabbing her hand as they started to walk onto the street. "Come on, let's get to the movie, and then get to the Castle before the Party has us executed for tardiness."

"Yeah, we've got work to do." El grinned. "Come on, I'll race you!"

"Nice timing, Wheeler." Max said from the table, throwing a card onto the deck. "Another three minutes, and you would've been late."

"Sorry, my alarm didn't go off." El shrugged. "And me and Mike were talking a lot during Lunch and lost track of time."

"Mike and I." Dustin corrected.

"It doesn't matter!" Lucas groaned.

The three other teens were playing with a deck of cards- Mike wasn't entirely sure what they were actually playing, but it kind of looked like *Go Fish*, though it might be *Uno*. However, Dustin looked a bit... distracted. He wondered what he called the meeting for.

Though, then again, maybe Dustin's annoyance was because Max was leaning on Lucas's shoulder, her arm thrown around his shoulder. The two had only started dating a few weeks ago, but they were already starting to get comfortable with PDA around the group.

"Where's Will?" he asked.

"Not here yet." Max shrugged.

Mike and El both stiffened. "Why?" he asked.

"Don't worry, it's nothing." Dustin said quickly. "He called a few minutes ago, said that his Mom couldn't drop him off so he had to walk."

"Alone?" Mike asked.

"He'll be fine." Max sighed, glancing over at them. "He hasn't been in any deep shit for four years, and I think we can let him walk on his

own for once.”

“But...” Mike was about to argue, but a loud noise above them shut him up.

“See? He’s fine.” Max said. “And you guys better get off the mattress, or he’ll land right on top of you.”

El and Mike jumped down, turning around to see Will crash. “God, that never gets easy.” he sighed. “How do you manage to land on your feet, Lucas?”

“Practice.” Lucas shrugged.

“I’ve been doing this for *longer* than you!” Will groaned, standing up and turning to Dustin. “Seriously, though, dude, what’s up? Why did you call the meeting?”

Max looked up. “Yeah. Are we telling them about our project, or-”

“I already told you, Max, not now.” Dustin said. “Last night I-”

“Hold on.” Lucas raised a hand, as Mike, El and Will all sat down at the table, with the former two still holding hands. “What project?”

“That’s not impor-” Dustin began.

“*Well!*” Max jumped to her feet, grinning. “Dustin and I have been thinking about powers and shit-”

“Max, please.” Dustin groaned. “Can I tell them *my* thing, and then *maybe* we can talk about our science project?”

Max grinned, playfully punching him on the shoulder and sitting back down. “Whatever, bro-bro, this better be quick.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“Let’s make this fast, Dustin.” Mike sighed. “If we have to go *out* today, I want to get home early enough for my Mom not to get pissed at me. I come home late one more time, I’m getting grounded as fuck.”

“Just tell her you and El were making out and you lost track of time. Anyone would believe that.” Lucas said.

Mike shrugged. “Not someone who doesn’t know I have a girlfriend.”

Will did a double take. “You haven’t told your Mom that you have a girlfriend?”

“Would *you*?” Mike shot back.

“Yes!” Will said. “Listen, if I could actually get a guy to go out with me, I’d immediately call everyone I know and scream for ten minutes straight. And you’ve been dating for *three years*.”

“When Lucas asked me out, Dustin had to physically restrain me from running up to the school intercom and announcing it to everyone.” Max shrugged, as Lucas blushed a little.

“I think the secret’s fun.” El smiled, playing a little with Mike’s hand. “Secret boyfriend.”

“It’s not that secret.” Lucas sighed. “We all found out you were dating two minutes after you made it official because you started kissing during practice sessions.”

“I mean, it’s still kinda secret at school.” Mike said. “Nobody will believe me when I say I have a girlfriend.”

“Because you call her your ‘girlfriend who’s homeschooled.’ That’s every nerdy kid lie.” Max rolled her eyes.

“Can we *please*,” Dustin yelled, throwing up his hands, “Stay on topic for *five fucking seconds*?”

“Dude, we’re teenagers. Our attention spans have been dead to us for longer than our mental health.” Will said blankly.

“Wow, Goth Phase Byers speaks again!” Lucas called.

“Call me that one more time and I’m setting you on fire.” Will said.

Finally, Dustin screamed, “*There’s another powered kid running*

around!”

They all froze, staring at him, and then Max said, “Well, Jesus, Dustin, open with *that*.”

“*I tried!*” Dustin groaned, and then he held up his phone. “Computer sent me an alert last night! Some kid was spotted running around in a transformation suit! Nobody got pics, but we’ve got a description.”

As she opened his phone, El asked, “Do you think... they’re a friend?”

“Maybe.” Mike replied. “Maybe we could make contact with them.”

“Maybe it’s Steve or Jonathan.” Lucas suggested. “They haven’t transformed in front of us before. They were all ‘oh, we don’t want to use our powers, we want to be normal but you kids have fun being freaks of nature.’”

“I don’t think they meant it like that.” El said.

“Jonathan and Steve are in College.” Will reminded him. “They’re not back till break on Monday.”

“Do we know anyone else?” Max asked.

“Hop and Will’s Mom haven’t transformed.” El added.

“I don’t think they can, their energy isn’t one that can be channelled.” Dustin said, still pulling up the article on his phone.

“Mom says that they used to have handmade suits, but they got destroyed in the original explosion over Castle Byers.” Will said.

“Okay, I got it!” Dustin finally said. “But I’m gonna have to censor through the bullshit about how evil we all are for existing.”

“Ugh, please do. That starts to grate after a while.” Max said, leaning back.

“*You* don’t have to hear it every other dinner.” Mike shot back. There was a slight pause, as El squeezed onto Mike’s hand, and he suddenly realized that he’d said the wrong thing.

“You still have to hear that shit from your parents?” Lucas asked.

Mike glanced to El; she was the only one he’d told, and she looked just as uncomfortable as he felt. “It’s... it’s, uh, worse since Nancy left for College. She was a master at changing the subject, but I don’t know how to without sounding suspicious, so... it doesn’t matter. Dustin, what about the superkid?”

Dustin hesitated, and then said, “Well, the ‘subject’ has been identified as ‘probably female’, but the person didn’t get that good a look. She’s dressed in all black-”

“All black? Are we sure it’s a transformed kid, then?” Will asked. They all gave him a look, and he said, “Well, we’ve all got at least two colors on our outfits. I haven’t seen a one-color kid, like... ever.” When they continued to stare, he said, “Come on. My powers rely on colors. I notice this stuff.”

“Maybe it was just dark.” Max shrugged.

Will considered, grabbing a card off the desk and flipping it in his hands absentmindedly. “Maybe. From what I remember about what the sky looked like last night, if the kid was wearing dark purple, dark blue, dark brown, it could easily blend into the black of the suit...”

“Okay, we can talk about color theory later.” Dustin said. “The rest of this says she was jumping from roof-to-roof, so maybe flight-based powers?”

“Come on, *we* could jump from roof-to-roof if we tried.” Max said.

“In the city. Was it in the city or more suburban area?” Lucas asked.

“City.”

“Then that’s not a clue.”

Dustin shrugged and continued reading. “No information is known about her magic thus far, but civilians are advised to keep a lookout for-’ Oh, *now* we get into the bullshit.”

They all groaned, and Mike said, “Do they *ever* give up?”

After he said that, Max glanced towards Dustin, asking, “Hey, would this be a good time to tell them about our... project?”

“What project?” Lucas asked.

“Well-” Dustin began.

However, before he could finish that thought, the computer let out a loud ping, and they all leapt to their feet.

“What’ve we got?” Will asked.

Dustin rushed to the computer, pulling up the screen and reading fast. “Someone planted explosives in the new convenience store. People are trapped inside.”

Max considered. “I can run over. Sounds like an El and Mike mission, though.”

“We should all go.” Will said. “I mean, not like I wanna chaperone a Mike/El date *again* -” El and Mike simultaneously flipped him off there. “-but if there’s another powered kid running around, they might show up here. We should keep a lookout.”

They glanced to each other, and Max said, “Well, if y’all want.”

They all moved in a circle, holding out their hands to summon their magic- except for Max, who started wildly flapping her hands.

“Transform on three?” El said, smiling a little.

“One.” Mike said first.

“Two.” Dustin added.

“*Three*.” Will said.

They all clapped their hands together, and the energy shot up their arms, changing them.

Max glanced at everyone, smiling, and said, “Time to go.”

3. You'd think people would be more Appreciative

Notes for the Chapter:

Quick notes:

1) The girl in the bathroom isn't a super important character. I wrote her to be one of Erica's friends- I heard she was getting a friend group in S3 and I figured her having a little superhero team would be fun. However, since she doesn't have, like, a name or personality, I just wrote her in for the chapter and she won't really show up again. Maybe after S3 I'll rewrite this chapter with a physical appearance/ name written in.

2) For some reason Ao3 didn't announce the update? It said 1/? under the Chapters even after I added Chapter Two. I should hope that doesn't keep happening, I like hearing your comments and that doesn't happen if you don't think I updated. :D

Love you!

~ Midas

CHAPTER THREE

You'd think people would be more Appreciative

When they'd first transformed, before they'd even become teenagers, they'd *adored* their forms. The way the energy shot up their arms, the costume that formed exactly to their style, exactly to fit them, the way that they felt like they could do *anything* .

What they *didn't* expect was to find out that their transformation could change over the years.

When Max turned fourteen, her outfit started getting more flashy; the red splotches would sometimes fade in and out over the blues while

she was still moving, like an old computer screensaver. Most of the other changes started small: Lucas's gloves got shorter, El's skirt got longer and frillier, Dustin's gold specks started glittering like stars whenever his lightning was used.

By the time they'd hit the point where they were rushing out of Castle Byers to drag people out of a convenience store, they looked pretty different from when they were twelve.

Will's outfit was the closest; as Wisdom, it was still basically a one-piece, with the exception of his boots, and still gray-and-rainbow, like metal hitting the light at just the right time. But his boots were taller, and his mask was much brighter than the rest of his suit, shimmering rainbow colors in the light. And there was another change, too; when Will sucked up a color, and his skin changed to match, his suit ever-so-slightly tinted with it.

Lucas's off-white and red remained, but it had swapped from mostly-red to a more even exchange of colors, more reminiscent of the flames implied in the name "Dragonfire." His mask was sharper, with more pointed edges instead of a curve at the ends. And when he sent off an energy blast, the red on his suit slightly glowed- not enough to provide, say, an adequate light source while trapped in the dark, but barely enough to be noticeable. Lucas thought it was cool as *hell*, and he really hoped that it got brighter as he got older.

Dustin's gold specks continued to shimmer like stars, once he transformed into Cyclone, and occasionally they moved across the blue, moving closer to his hands as he shot out the electricity. He noticed, too, that his suit had what he called a "feature"- when he got too close to a large body of water, the gold specks started glowing pretty bright, probably as a warning- Dustin found out quite quickly that his electric powers didn't *quite* mix with water... or rubber, for that matter, but that was a discussion for another time.

Max's colors continued to swirl, to shift along her suit as she ran as Zoomer. And her hair moved from a twisted style to a triple french braid ponytail- and that wasn't the only thing that changed with her hair. Whenever she transformed, her hair faded to a dark blue at the tips, which excited her to no end (and disappointed her when she changed back and found out that it wasn't permanent). She seemed to

be able to move a bit faster with every passing year, too, though not by too much.

As Mike's confidence in his powers grew, his Paladin suit seemed to get more decorative. While it was still golden-brown, some darker gold started to swirl around his fingers, making a distinctive spin. Some of the brown splotches fanned out around his shoulders into a flowery pattern, and his mask gained a golden outline around the edges. His hair got even more curly during his transformation as he got older, and the more he changed, the brighter his suit got, until it was almost as shining as Will's.

And El's... well, in Mike's opinion, El got more beautiful every passing day, and her change in suit just helped with that impression. As her hair got longer, the transformation started styling it into a waterfall braid decorated with pale pink ribbons that also vanished once she returned to normal. She didn't have the pale pink dress anymore, but a black turtleneck and pink skirt. Her skirt was longer than the dress had been, and a darker shade, but it didn't seem to get in her way while she ran, which was *quite* a good thing, as they did a lot of running in the vigilante business. Her mask still had the flowery design and masquerade feel, but lighter pink specks had grown in to offset the darker pink swirls, and her gloves, which were still a sparkly black, the glimmer was now in shades matching more of her skirt than the gloves they were attached to.

All in all, Paladin thought they looked pretty damn impressive for a bunch of dumb teenagers.

"We're here!" Zoomer announced, and everyone released her, stopping to breathe for a second; even after all these years, they hadn't gotten as used to her speedmode as she had.

They looked ahead, and El and Dustin both gasped as they saw the rubble. Up ahead, half of the convenience store had caved in, while the other half looked completely normal; it was almost eerie. A group had gathered from the streets around them, but it looked as if the police hadn't arrived yet.

"Alright," Lucas said, turning to the others, a plan already formulating in his mind. "Alright, we've probably only got a few

minutes until the authorities arrive. El, Paladin, you go in first- move the rubble, protect the people inside. Cyclone, you and Zoomer are on Mystery Girl duty; keep a lookout. I'll be alternating between keeping an eye out for her and for the cops; if they arrive, I'll send out a blast to alert you. Wisdom, we need you to buffer between the crowd and the building, in case any of them try to attack El and Paladin. Also, if you see any more explosives, freeze them over."

"Got it!" Zoomer cheered, as Wisdom nodded.

El beamed, grabbing Paladin's hand. "Let's go!"

Paladin waved at the rest as El rushed him down the hill, pushing them ever-so-slightly with her powers to move them forwards faster. As they ran, he saw a sheet of ice shoot up, blocking the crowd from the rubble, but leaving a narrow strip for Paladin and El to sneak into. He glanced back, and saw Wisdom running after them, his skin white as a sheet, and a large bag thumping against his leg. The bag had been Max's idea, from last year; her and Will had filled it to the brim with items of solitary colors for him. None of the items were large enough for their powers to hold for longer than a few minutes, but it was definitely helpful. Especially with what little time they had.

The two heroes squeezed themselves between the ice wall and the rubble, stopping around the center of the building. El glanced around quickly, and then slowly released Paladin's hand, raising both of her arms. The front of the rubble started to rise into the air as she concentrated, and after a minute, it was high enough for Paladin to race into the mess.

After peering through the rising debris, he spotted a hole in the side of the building, and squeezed through it as fast as he could. Once he burst in, he looked around, spotted a crowd of people in the corner of the standing wall. They stared at him, with expressions of relief, suspicion, wonder and confusion spread throughout.

"My friend's holding the rubble up, but she can't do it for long!" Paladin announced. "Go! Go! Go!"

There was a pause, before the people must have decided that it was

worth it to trust him, as they all started rushing past. Paladin stopped one woman on the way out, asking, "Is this everyone?"

"There are some in the girls' room." she said hurriedly. "The door wouldn't open. Do you-"

"I'll get them out. You keep going." he said, before rushing off.

Wisdom paused just beyond the ice wall. The crowd behind the wall was starting to yell, a few of them rushing forwards to try and knock it down.

"For the love of *fuck*," he muttered under his breath. "We're trying to help, you pieces of shit."

It took a minute, but eventually, the crowd from inside the building started rushing out, ducking to avoid debris and skittering to keep themselves from running into El, who was still attempting to keep everything floating.

Some people finally reached the end of the ice wall, rushing out and into the crowd. Wisdom ran forwards, grabbing a man, and said, "What happened? Do you know what exploded?"

The man simply pulled away, giving him a dark glare, before leaving. He didn't have to say it out loud, but Wisdom knew exactly what he was thinking. *Freak*.

"You'd think people would be more appreciative." he muttered under his breath.

However, a woman managed to stop by him. "Are you with them?" she asked, gesturing to El, and presumably Paladin, inside the building.

"Well, since we're almost always seen together, I would say so." he said.

The woman hesitated, and then said, "That explosion... we thought we saw someone throw something through the window and run

away, but we couldn't check before the wall collapsed."

"Someone?" Wisdom asked hesitantly.

The woman bit her lip and said, "Well, someone who was dressed in black. I couldn't get a good look..."

Wisdom froze, his breath knocked out of him.

Just what we needed. For the other Powered kid to be a Villain.

And before he could say anything else, a blast of red energy shot above his head.

"That's the cops." Wisdom said, gesturing for the woman to go, before yelling, "*El! Paladin! We gotta go!*"

Paladin rushed to the bathroom door, hesitating for only a second before throwing out his hand, strands of light bursting from his fingers and rushing into the lock, playing with the mechanism. After it retreated back into his hand, he took a breath and tried the handle. It still didn't open.

So the door was stuck. Still wouldn't be a problem.

He yelled, as loud as he could, "I'm breaking down the door! Get as far as you can!"

Then he took another breath, steadying himself, before thinking, *Okay. We practiced this.*

Push the field.

And he threw out his hands, jumping back, as a spherical forcefield burst from his hands, rammed into the door, and knocked it down, before it dissipated into the air.

Nice!

He rushed in, as a few women ran past him, rushing to get out. He

kicked open a few stalls, yelling, "Is anyone still here?"

He reached the last stall, and realized it was locked. He blushed bright red as he yelled, "I'm *really* sorry, but I've got to get you out!"

He dropped to the ground, crawling under the crack at the bottom. He looked up, seeing a girl of around twelve, who was just sitting on the floor, staring into the air.

Oh! He recognized this girl; she was one of Erica's friends. What was her name? He dropped down, saying, "Hey, we gotta go."

She simply turned, staring at him, and he realized that her eyes were glassy.

"Uh, are you okay?"

She simply stared again, and then said, in a completely blank tone, "Watch out."

"Wh-what?"

Absolutely no emotion was conveyed in her face or tone. "Watch out." she said again. "Look behind you."

Paladin glanced behind him; nothing was there but the door to the stall. "What are you talking about? Look, we have to go-

"Break the Glass."

All at once, Paladin's blood ran cold, feeling completely frozen. *She couldn't know about that* . "What... what, what are you talking about?"

"It gets worse." she said. "It gets *so much worse*."

"What are you *talking about*?" He was starting to get really panicked, in a panic he hadn't experienced since... "*What are you talking about?*"

"Something is missing, something missing." she simply added. "Wake it up and break the glass."

“What are you talking about?”

At that moment, Paladin heard El yelling, “Time to go!” from somewhere far away.

He took a deep breath, stole himself, and then lifted the girl in his arms, kicking the stall door down and rushing out with her, running out of the building and towards El, who was slowly letting the debris start to drop.

“I’m fine.” she said quickly, anticipating what his first question would be. “But Wisdom’s ice is running out, and Dragon’s signal just shot out- are you okay?”

He must have looked pale, and he might be shaking. He didn’t know. But he felt the girl move in his arms, and he dropped her to the ground. “What’s going on?” she asked, almost sleepily.

“What were you talking about?” he asked quickly, kneeling in front of her, his voice getting louder. “In there? What you said about the glass?”

She stared at him in confusion, and then in horror. “You saw that?” she asked, terrified.

“What did you mean?”

“I don’t know! It’s just something that happens,” she said, speaking as fast as she could, “When I freak out, I sometimes say things, things that’ll happen, *please don’t tell my Mom -*”

El looked very concerned, but she said, “Paladin, we have to go.”

The girl looked between them, before saying, “Wait... you guys are the heroes, right? What happened?”

“We have to go .” El repeated, grabbing Paladin’s hand and pushing the girl forwards a bit. “This ice wall’s coming down in a bit and I don’t want to be stuck here, especially when the cops show up.”

The girl raced off, and as they ran after her, El asked, “Mike, are you okay?”

He slowly turned to her, fear in his eyes, and he shook his head.

She stared at him as they continued to run, stopping just short of the ice wall, where Dragonfire and Wisdom were waiting.

“Where’re the others?” El asked.

“Thought they saw something.” Dragonfire said. “We’re going back to the base on our own.”

El glanced at Paladin, asking, “Can you make it that far?”

He nodded, using his free hand to reach towards his stomach, which was starting to hurt.

And then they raced off, leaving the building behind them.

4. Max and Dustin risk their lives for the Internet

Notes for the Chapter:

this turned out a bit longer than expected lol

CHAPTER FOUR

Max and Dustin risk their lives for the Internet

The second they were in Castle Byers, Mike detransformed and crashed to the ground, gripping his stomach and struggling to breathe.

El instantly gasped, dropping her own transformation and kneeling in front of him, saying, “Mike! Mike, can you hear me? Do you need anything?”

He shook his head. “I... I just need a second. I...”

Lucas and Will also changed back to normal, and backed up a little; Mike had informed them multiple times that he didn’t like being crowded during panic attacks. Will glanced at Lucas and El continued to talk to her boyfriend, and he said, “I thought... he hasn’t had one of these in months.”

“Panic Attacks can sometimes be more or less frequent.” Lucas explained. “My Dad says-”

“Well, I mean...” Will hesitated. “Was... was it because of his powers?”

Lucas flinched. “I... I thought he had a good hold on those now, so long as it wasn’t too big...”

They stopped talking once they saw Mike stand up, once again holding hands with El. “Are you okay?” she asked again.

“F-for now.” he said, biting his lip and glancing down at the ground.

“Uh, Lucas?”

Lucas rushed over. “Yeah?”

“Do... do your sister’s friends have powers?”

Lucas stared at him for a second, and then said, “Uh... uh, well...”

“It’s okay if you didn’t tell us.” Will jumped in, moving over to stand by the others. “It’s okay, we get that they probably swore you to secrecy or whatever.”

Lucas glanced between them for a minute, and then said, “Y-yeah. Yeah. I think she’s trying to form her own superhero squad but I made her promise to wait til she’s fifteen. I mean, we were *way* young when we started, but-”

“Does one of them have...” Mike hesitated, gripping onto El’s hand and paling a little. “Does one of them have future vision?”

“I think so, yeah.”

That was the wrong answer, apparently, because Mike let out a choked sob, using his free hand to cover his mouth and leaning in towards El. She glanced at the other boys, clearly as worried as them.

“Mike, what happened?” she asked carefully.

He was trying to slow his breathing, clearly trying to keep himself calm. “She... she was staring into space, really blank. She... she told me to watch out, and... she kept mentioning breaking the glass. I think... I think she said something bad is coming, worse than... than the...”

They all froze over, completely lost on what to say as a cold fear gripped them. Mike kept trying to keep himself calm, and eventually, he just turned around and hugged El, gripping onto her shirt. She hugged him back, and finally, she said, “Listen. Listen, it’s okay. Nothing’s going to happen to you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“We won’t let anything happen to you.” Will added, and El shot him

an appreciative glance.

Before they could say anything else, they heard a clatter from above; someone was falling down the trap-floor. Mike slowly pulled away from El, backing up a little, as Dustin and Max fell onto the mattress.

"I'm not *saying* it was your fault." Max said again. "I'm just *saying*, if you had slowed down enough to let me push us into speedmode..."

"You could have done that yourself!" Dustin argued, rolling his eyes. "For the love of *fuck*, Max-"

"What happened?" Lucas asked.

"We thought we saw Mystery Girl." Max said. "But she must've doubled back or hid real well or something, cause we lost her."

"Did you guys get out okay?" Dustin asked.

They glanced to each other, and after a second, Mike said, "Yeah. Yeah, we're fine."

"Good! Because now we can show you our pet project!" Max cheered. "Dustin, go set up."

"Alright, fine." Dustin said, though a smile grew on his face as he rushed towards the supercomputer- which he had affectionately and creatively named "Computer."

"What's this about, Mayfield?" Mike asked.

"*Follow us!*" Max cheered, rushing over to the Supercomputer and sitting on the rolling chair next to Dustin, spinning it around. The others glanced at each other, before moving beside her. Dustin started typing on the keyboard, while Max said, "So, you guys know how other powered kids are running around?"

"Yeah, we were just talking about that." Mike said. "There's probably quite a bit."

El nodded. "My siblings."

“But we can’t exactly talk to them directly, right?” Max prodded.

“Yeah. You know whenever a powered kid gets exposed, it’s all over the fucking news so we know who to turn into the cops.” Lucas added. “Can’t exactly form an afterschool club.”

“Yeah, well, Dustin and I were thinking,” Max said, as Dustin started typing more code in, “If we were on our own, running around with powers, we’d want to be able to contact people who were like us, and who wouldn’t turn us into the fucking cops. Right?”

Mike glanced at El, Lucas and Will, who looked just as confused as him, before he asked, “Where are you going with this?”

Max said, “Well, we, uh... we set up an email.”

There was a pause, before Will said, “Uh... are you sure that’s a good idea-?”

“What the *fuck*?” Mike yelled.

“That’s not the best plan.” Lucas said apologetically.

“That’s the *worst* plan! Anyone could find that!” Mike yelled. “Does it have our personal information? What the-”

“Slow the fuck down.” Dustin said, turning around for a second. “We’re not morons, we know this is a risk.”

“Dustin’s a tech fucking genius.” Max grinned. “He’s rigged the site.”

“Site?” El asked.

“Here,” Dustin said, pressing a button on the supercomputer. The Code then dropped, revealing a normal website. Mike scanned it, feeling his blood run cold as he saw it was a “Powered Reporting” site- articles about “dangerous” powered people being spotted, who they were, what they could do, who to report them to...

“*This* is our cover.” Dustin said, a slight layer of disgust in his tone. “It’s already an existing website, so don’t worry, *we’re* not saying this shit. It’s the most popular ‘powered news site’ at the moment.

However, I managed to hack into the code, and added some... improvements.”

“With the help of our favorite Computer.” Max beamed, spinning around some more. “Seriously, the guy who built this was a fucking genius.”

“Well, Dustin did some updates when we found the place.” Will shrugged. “So he’s part of it.”

“Here’s how it works.” Dustin said. “It should pop up in a second; anyway, about the email itself, don’t worry, the code’s hidden under layers and layers of firewalls. It should only be able to be reached by my computer. Should it get hacked, I have the ability to delete in three seconds.” Dustin said. “And- oh! There it is!”

They looked to the screen, where a pop-up had appeared, looking similar to a site poll, asking the reader’s opinion on the reliability of the site.

“It doesn’t pop up for everyone.” Dustin said. “It pops up in the age range of powers so far- which is about twenty-two and under- and scans recent search history-”

“That’s creepy as fuck.” Mike said.

“Oh, the government’s already doing it, I just hacked in.” Dustin said. “Anyway, if the computer thinks powers are a possibility, it sends the popup to the site.”

“If you hit any of the ‘yes, this site is right about powered kids being monsters’ buttons,” Max said, “It says some bullshit about participating in the poll and never sends the popup again. But if you hit the ‘NO, powered kids are great’ options, it asks this.”

Dustin hit one of the ‘NO’s, and the popup replaced the text with

Are you a powered individual who requires assistance?

YES.

After Dustin clicked the last response, the site stalled for a bit, and

the popup had a simple email address- labelled *thehawkparty*.

“Like ‘Hawkins Party’.” Max explained, just in case their minds were stalling for a bit.

“What do you think?” Dustin asked.

“This is... *nice*...” Will said hesitantly. “But it could go wrong in so many ways.”

“Oh, because there’s no way *that* could lead back to us.” Lucas groaned.

“It’s not connected to any of our actual emails or anything!” Dustin said. “We made a new one.”

“And we’ve connected it to our phones under Hopper and Joyce’s incognito shit. Super Undercover, as you know.” Max said. “We get any distress calls, it goes straight to me.”

“I know it sounds.... Like this could potentially backfire horribly.” Dustin said. “And it’s unlikely it’ll actually reach people. But... if we could just help *one* kid, get one kid safe, I think it’d be worth it.”

“I know I’d give anything to have this when I was in California.” Max admitted.

The others glanced at each other. Finally, Will said, “Well, it’s not like we can stop you at this point.”

“And if we have to go on the run because you exposed us with this,” Mike said, “I think we might be able to make it a few years.”

“We were thinking you guys might be able to help, too.” Max added. “We can all manage it together, get messages to kids with powers close to ours. El, you could probably send out some kind of message to kids with mental powers. Will could upload his color list in case there’s some kid with the same power- have there been repeats yet? Anyone know? And, Mike, maybe you could do, like, a thing on how to deal with powers that are a trigger. There’s *gotta* be another one of you out there, right?”

Mike flinched, but nodded. "I mean... I'll see what I can do."

"Yeah." Max said. "Oh, and uh, if you guys could *not* mention our huge risky email to Hopper and Will's Mom, that'd be *great*."

"Now," Dustin turned around. "Let's talk plans for finding our Mystery Girl."

"I think..." El said, waiting until everyone turned to her, before she finished, "She'll come to us. If she wants."

Will glanced towards the ground, eyes narrowed, seemingly thinking about something, while the rest of them considered this. "I mean... I guess." Dustin said. "But what if she thinks we'll hurt her?"

"We've been running around superhero-ing for *years*." Lucas shrugged. "I doubt any powered kid would think we're a threat."

"Especially if she's figured out how to transform already. Means she's not scared of her powers." Dustin said.

Mike glanced towards Will, and asked, "Hey? You okay?"

Will hesitated, as everyone turned to look at him, and then he said, "Just... what if she's not friendly to *us* ? What if she wants to hurt us?"

They all fell silent, realizing that they hadn't even considered that.

"Why would a powered kid want to hurt another?" Max asked. "We're all in this together, right?"

They weren't exactly sure how to answer.

Mike turned the key in the lock, keeping his other hand on his jacket, gripping onto the fabric as he pushed the door open. He still was on a panicked edge from that day, and being home wasn't really going to help. As he entered, hanging his key back up on the rack and kicking the door shut, he heard his Mom in the kitchen, chatting with Holly. He bit his lip, walking forwards and towards his room, hoping to *God*

he wasn't noticed. He didn't want to talk right now, he just wanted to be *alone* ...

"Michael!"

Goddamnit.

He turned, forcing a smile on his face. "Hey!" As Karen moved from the kitchen and into view, he went over anything she could possibly be mad about in his head. He'd texted her to tell her he was having dinner with his friends (well, he was on a date with El, but she didn't need to know that), so she probably wouldn't be upset about that. He'd taken out the trash and helped Holly with homework that morning. And it was a Saturday, so she wouldn't have gotten a call from school...

"I tried to call you an hour ago!"

Shit, shit, *shit*. Mike pulled his phone out of his pocket, and sure enough, *Missed Call*. "Oh, uh, sorry," he said. "Put it on silent so I could, you know, talk with my friends." *Play up the friends. That'll get you out of trouble.*

"Well, I guess it's alright..." Karen sighed, as Holly rushed out from beside her, running into the living room. *Good, that worked.* "I'm just... there's all kinds of *people* running around."

Mike hated that feeling. That sinking feeling in his stomach whenever his parents, or teachers, or *anyone* brought up how "dangerous" and "misguided" those damn powered kids were. "Yeah, I know."

"And when I *tried* to call, it was because some new powered girl was spotted at the new Convenience Store- did you see that it got destroyed?"

"No." Mike lied.

"Yeah. They saw her digging through the rubble. She got away, but she might've run into town, tried to blow something else up."

"Well," Mike said carefully. "She might *not* have blown it up."

"You can never be too careful, Michael, especially with all of those poor kids-"

"I've got homework to do, I'm gonna go." Mike said, turning to go after giving Holly a quick look.

"Oh! Remember to clean your room. Nancy's gonna be back Monday."

Mike turned, giving his Mom a glare. "What? Is she gonna move into my room?"

Karen gave Mike one of those "disappointed Mom" glares. "Michael. Clean your room."

It was best not to argue. Besides, it gave him an excuse to escape the conversation. He walked off as quickly as he dared, shutting the door to his room behind him and rushing to his bed, sitting down and hugging his knees. All in all, that conversation could have gone *way* worse. If his Dad had been there to add in his "opinions" on Powers... at least his Mom had good intentions. He was never quite sure with his Dad.

He slowly pulled out his phone, typing in a number quickly. After a few moments, she picked up.

"Mike?" El asked, and he smiled a little upon hearing her voice. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah." Mike nodded. "Just... wanted to hear you."

He could hear her laughing a little. Her laugh was so pretty. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do you wanna... talk about today?"

Mike gripped his jacket again, shutting his eyes and trying to remember his breathing pattern. 1, 2, 3, 4, breathe in. 1, 2, 3, 4, breathe out.

"I... I think I'll be fine." he lied.

"Did..." El hesitated. "Did she say anything? A clue? To know what to look for?"

Mike thought back, trying to remember specifics that the kid had said. "I... I don't know. I kinda freaked out once I heard 'glass' and didn't really process the rest. I'm sorry, I..."

"It's okay." El said. "We'll deal with it. We'll take care of it. We always do."

Mike smiled a little. "I love you."

"Love you, too."

Mike remembered the first time he'd told her that he loved her. They were about fourteen, and had just exited a fight with some criminals on the street. El had a gash on her arm that she kept insisting was okay, but Mike kept freaking out. Once she'd calmed him down enough to explain that it really *was* fine and he didn't have to worry, he'd just let it slip.

"*I love you.*" he'd said, before he could think about it. "I don't want you to get hurt."

El had smiled at him, a smile so bright it could rival the sun. "I love you, too." she'd said.

And if Mike thought he was in love with her then, well, it had only gotten deeper as the years went on.

"So," he said, smiling again, "What are you doing this week?"

"Oh," she said brightly, "I'd say still hanging out at the Castle, doing schoolwork and online classes and stuff. You got anything planned?"

"There's a new arcade opening Tuesday."

"Hmm," El said, a humor in her voice, "Last time I was in an arcade, I killed several men."

"Well, *technically*, we don't know *how* dead they are." Mike said. "And this is a different place."

"If you'd like to go," El said, "I can pick you up from school."

"We can grab dinner at Benny's." Mike suggested. "As many waffles as you want."

"It's a date." There was a pause, and then El said, "Ugh, Hop needs me. See you tomorrow?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah." Mike said. "Love you."

Soon after she hung up, Mike heard a knock on his door. He turned, carefully saying, "Yeah?"

The door creaked open, and Holly peered in. Mike sighed and gestured for her to enter, and the seven-year-old quickly ran in, kicking the door closed behind her and running to sit by her brother.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Mommy's busy and Daddy's at work and I'm *bored*." she said.

"You want to hear a story?" Mike asked.

Holly eagerly nodded, scooting closer.

"Well," Mike said, thinking. "Once upon a time, there was a princess in a tower."

"A pretty princess?"

"The prettiest. But a mean dragon kept her and her cool older sister locked up, so she didn't know any life outside-"

"Was her sister a Queen?"

"Yeah, sure, that sounds right. Anyway, one day, she escaped, and met a band of Knights, who were searching for their lost friend. She helped them find him with her dragon powers-"

"Dragon powers?" Holly asked, eyes wide.

“Yeah. She could... breathe fire, and fly. And they helped her defeat the Dragon and free her sister, and they-”

“I wanna be a Dragon Princess.” Holly said, wide-eyed.

Mike hesitated, wondering whether he should tell her to avoid wishing she was powered altogether. Finally, though, he settled on saying, “You can be whatever you want to be, Hols.”

“Like a Dragon Princess?”

“Absolutely.”

He continued the story, elaborating on the princess’s quests with the Knights, smiling a bit as she listened with rapt attention. She’d never guess where his stories came from, he assumed, but it was nice to have a listener.

After a while, though, she got tired, so he carried her to her room, making sure to tuck her in.

“I’m not tired.” she argued the whole way there.

“Yes, you are.” he said.

“But I can’t go to sleep. Not until you tell me about the Battle.”

Mike smiled. “We’ll leave that story for tomorrow, how’s that?”

As Holly grumpily nodded, Mike sat at the edge of her bed, and he slowly started to sing.

“I see trees of green, red roses, too. I see them bloom, for me and for you. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”

She was asleep by the bridge, but Mike kept singing, staring at the wall, finally distracted from his worries, his worries that he’d definitely spend all night worrying about, have nightmares over, wake up crying over. But for now, he was just singing a nice, happy song to his baby sister.

“I hear babies cry, I watch them grow. They’ll learn much more than I’ll

ever know.”

“And I think to myself... what a wonderful world.”

5. Mystery Girl isn't too Helpful

CHAPTER FIVE

Mystery Girl isn't too Helpful

One thing El loved to do in the morning was figure out a new hairstyle.

She'd had her head shaved for *years* in the Lab, and now that she was out, she could grow her hair as long as she wanted- and she wanted it *long*. It had finally reached below her shoulders, and she loved to figure out what to do with it. She had subscribed to basically every hairstyle channel on YouTube, spending hours trying to follow instructions to try and do something new to her hair. Her waterfall braid that happened during her transformation was one of her favorites- though she avoided doing that a lot, just in case some kid on the street overheard the boys slip and call her "El" in public and noticed her appearance and put it together.

On that Monday morning, she'd spent the last hour since her shower trying to perfect a fishtail braid, occasionally cursing the tangles she had to work through.

As she worked, she heard Kali yell, "Jane, if you want food, you've gotta come and get it! I'm not waiting for you again!"

El groaned and stood up, giving up on completing her braid and just tying a ribbon around the point where she left off. She stood up, thinking she could probably grab some Eggos before her first online class- which was another new territory for her. Four years ago, she hadn't any concept of the internet, and now she was listening to complete strangers teach her about the world, calling her "Jane" expecting her to do schoolwork for next week.

She enjoyed it, though. She liked learning things, catching up to other kids her age; hopefully, she'd be able to reach the same level by the time her friends went to College, but she'd have to work *hard* if

she wanted that to actually happen. She doubted she'd be able to join her friends in public school, but that was probably for the best: she wasn't sure she wanted to be around so many people all the time, or sit in a building for eight straight hours. Also, from what she heard from her friends, school could be quite stressful, and stress tended to bring out random bursts of her powers, and she didn't think she could *quite* get away with lifting people off the ground with her mind out of her own frustration.

El walked out of her room, hearing Kali's voice drifting through the hall from the kitchen. She was starting to yell. "Seriously, I need you to hurry up—"

"I'm *coming* ." El called out, entering the kitchen and starting when she saw her sister on the phone. *Shit, she wasn't talking to me there.* "Oh, sorry."

Kali glanced at her, before saying into her phone, "Gotta go. We'll talk about it later."

As she hung up and moved to sit at the table, sitting across from her sister, El asked, "Who was that?"

"One of the kids from my online class needed homework help. Bit of a jerk, if I'm being honest." Kali shrugged, passing El a plate or prepared Eggos. "The Chief's already gone to work, but he says if you skip class to call your boyfriend again, you're getting grounded."

"That was *one time*." El sighed. "But seriously, who were you talking to?"

Kali gave her an odd look, caught her drift, and then groaned, burying her head in her hands. "You're *not* setting me up on a date."

"Why *not*?"

"First of all, like I told you, she's a jerk." Kali said. "And second, just because *you* somehow managed to find a soulmate at twelve doesn't mean you can go around matchmaking people."

"Why not?"

Kali rolled her eyes. "You're a pain, you know that?"

"*You're a pain!*"

Before Kali could respond, her phone buzzed again. She picked it up, eyes narrowing.

"Is that your classmate?" El asked, interested.

Kali hesitated, before saying, "Yes. Look, I'm gonna be in my room. Text if you need anything."

"Or I could just yell really loud." El said.

"Yeah, don't do that."

Kali rushed off, leaving El alone with her plate of Eggos. El waited a second, and then pulled out her phone, texting Mike. - *Nancy back yet?*

She got a response after only a minute. - *Not yet. Arriving after school.*

- *Oh, are you in class?*

- *Yep.*

- *So you shouldn't be texting me.*

- *Nope.*

El paused for a bit, and then said, - *But did you see last night's episode?*

- *FUCK yeah, that was bullshit!*

"Jonathan's coming back today, and I'm stuck in *fucking school* !" Will groaned, banging his head on the locker.

"Buddy, chill. Jonathan's not gonna disappear off to College instantly because you didn't meet him at the airport." Dustin said, grabbing next period's books from his own locker, sending his friend a sympathetic look.

“We’re *not* meeting him at the airport. He’s driving in with Nancy and Steve.” Jonathan said.

“They don’t go to the same College.”

“Not *really*, but close enough to carpool.”

“Seems inconvenient. I’d rather fly in. It goes a lot faster.” Dustin shrugged. “Where are the others?”

Will thought. “I think they’re in History right now. So they’ll probably be a little late to their next class, we all know that teacher goes on *forever* -”

Dustin held up a finger, shushing him for a second and pulling out his phone. He stared for a second, and then he said, “The Girl’s been spotted.”

“What?” Will said, rushing over to look at the notification.

“She’s out there!” Dustin groaned. “And we’re stuck here because if we skip class again we’re *fucked* !”

“Dude,” Will said, “Just treat it like any other robbery. Send out El.”

“But...” Dustin hesitated, even as he pulled up his messaging app. “I dunno it’s just... I hate when we have to do this. Why can’t we just all be fucking done with school?”

“I dunno, dude, but I’d love to get out of here when we’re *not* in danger of detention.” Will sighed, grabbing his books as Dustin continued to text.

El knocked on Kali’s door. “Hey! I’m going out! Cover for me!”

Kali didn’t respond, but El didn’t have time to make sure she’d been heard. She rushed to her room, opening the window and letting energy run between her fingers, before slamming them together and feeling the transformation energy overwhelm her. She then leapt out the window, throwing herself out and using her powers to fly her to

the top of another building, where she rushed and started jumping between rooftops.

Mystery Girl had been spotted close to the city, so El was heading into town. She still didn't quite like all the noise and people that tended to be there, but at least it offered quite a few places to hide. Which, she guessed, meant she'd probably have to search through a *lot* of the city to try and find the new Powered girl.

And search she did. She ducked down alleys, jumped through rooftops, and peered through dark windows. Just looking for a girl in black.

She was starting to lose hope when she spotted her.

El was sitting atop a building, scanning, trying to avoid the occasional police car and keep out of eyesight of passersby. Then her eyes finally fell on a flash of movement in an alley, and she looked just in time to see a black-clothed figure vanish.

Well, she thought, as she jumped towards the figure, Either that's Mystery Girl, or someone else who's dressing in all black and ducking into alleys. Might as well check it out.

She jumped onto the roof, rolling a little as she landed, before rushing to the end of the building and leaping off, landing herself right at the end of the alley. She then looked up to see, to both shock and delight, the Mystery Girl.

They stared for a minute, with El scanning the girl's outfit- it truly *was* all-black, Will would be disappointed- and deducing that this was, indeed, a Transformation Suit. While it looked more casual than the other outfits- a black turtleneck, black leggings, black boots, black jacket- it definitely had that *aura* of difference, as well as the strange material that none of them had been able to figure out. Not to mention the girl had a black mask covering her eyes, which remained cold as she watched El, possibly waiting for her to make a move.

"L-look," El finally said, breaking out of her surprise, "I'm just a friend. Wanna know what you're doing here."

"I'm taking care of things." the girl simply said.

"That's what we're doing- me and the Party."

"Hmm, no. No, you're not."

El felt struck. "What do you mean?"

The girl gave her a look. "Wow. You really don't know. Nobody thought to tell you, huh?"

"Tell me *what* ?"

"Why I blew up the convenience store?"

El froze. "That... that *was* you?"

"Well, *you* weren't going to do it."

"Why would we?"

The girl stared at her, as if considering. Then, she said, "No, no, it doesn't matter. I'm taking care of it. You and your friends, just stay in your lane and out of my way, and I'll take care of everything."

"What? No." El said, her expression hardening. "No, we're not just going to let you run around and hurt people!"

"I hurt people who deserve it."

"All those innocent people in the store? They deserved it?" The girl fell silent. "Look, we don't want to fight you. But we will if we have to."

The girls stared at each other for a second. Finally, the Black-clothed girl peered over El's shoulder, staring at the other end of the alley, considering. Then, she said, "I guess we're enemies, then."

At that moment, she leapt, and El gaped as she flew over her head, landing atop a wall. The girl then whipped around and said, "There's an arcade opening tomorrow. Stay away from it."

And then she leapt over the wall, and disappeared.

6. Some more Fun Sibling Bonding

CHAPTER SIX

Some more Fun Sibling Bonding

“Jonathan!”

Will rushed forwards, jumping up to hug his brother. Jonathan hugged him back, laughing, and said, “Hey, buddy! How’ve you been?”

“I missed you! Nobody else will listen to our favorite songs!” Will said. “But now we can blast it really loud, right?”

Jonathan glanced to Joyce, who shrugged and smiled before moving over to join the hug. “Whatever you guys want.”

Mike glanced towards the car. He and Dustin had joined the Byers to wait for the teenagers to arrive home, sitting in the yard and watching the road for Steve’s car. Eventually they’d moved to Joyce’s garden, where Dustin and Mike tried to help water the plants, only to drop the watering can multiple times onto their feet. Will stayed back, not wanting to accidentally drain the color from one of the plants and refusing to wear gardening gloves, opting instead to keep watching the road. Joyce had eventually moved to show the boys how to actually help with the garden, and they’d been busy with the plants by the time the car had pulled into the driveway, and Jonathan had jumped out of the passenger’s seat.

Dustin jumped up, rushing towards the driver’s seat, where Steve jumped out, saying something to Jonathan about waiting until the car was off before he got out. “Hey!” Dustin cheered.

Steve jumped, staring down at the kid. “Dustin, hey! What are you doing here?”

“Came to see you.” Dustin said, grinning a little. “Tutor anyone else while I was gone?”

“Ha-ha.”

Mike slowly stood up, walking over to the car, keeping his hands in his pockets. Jonathan was talking again, telling Will and Joyce about some things that happened at NYU. He managed to reach the driveway by the time the back door opened, and Nancy walked out. She was saying something to Steve along the lines of “Since when did *you* adopt Dustin?”

“Nancy!” Mike called, feeling a smile grow on his face.

Nancy turned, grinning. Her hair was a bit longer than he remembered; it only barely reached her shoulders, but she’d had it even shorter last Summer. Or maybe she’d just worn it up enough that Mike didn’t notice it get longer. But that didn’t matter; what mattered is that she looked *happy*, something that used to be rare to see.

“Mike!” Nancy said, rushing forwards and giving him a quick hug. “Hi! I didn’t know you’d be here!”

“Well, didn’t want to wait to meet you at the restaurant.” Mike shrugged. “Mom said I could meet you guys there, she would’ve come, too, but Holly’s got school late- she’s in Drama Club now.”

“Oh, wonderful, as if we need more drama in this family.” Nancy laughed. “God, this town is just as boring as I remember.”

“You’ve only been gone a few months.”

“Yeah, and this year has been *wild*.” Nancy said. “You would not *believe* what kind of shit goes down at College parties. I’ve started volunteering to chaperone drunk kids back to their dorms and I’ve seen *everything*.”

“Chaperone Drunk Kids?” Steve asked, turning around for a second. “I seem to recall you drunk-calling me and Jonathan at least three times to talk about-”

Nancy shushed him. “Not in front of the kids.”

“We’re *sixteen*, Nance!” Mike groaned.

“Yeah, we’re not kids!” Dustin said.

“You can’t even drive.” Steve said.

Dustin shot him a glare. “Just because I haven’t passed the test yet...”

“Nancy!”

Mike froze over, the sound of her voice overwhelming him for a second, before he could turn and smile at El, who ran up, giving Nancy a quick hug. “How’s school?” she asked.

“Hey, El! Still dating my brother?” Nancy asked, ruffling the younger girl’s hair really quick.

“Obviously.” El said, moving over to grab Mike’s hand. She shot Dustin a quick look- quick enough to be missed by most people, but enough to communicate *something* to him. Mike caught it, but said nothing; he’d seen that look before, and it meant she’d gone *out* while they were in class. But he wasn’t about to say anything in public, when anyone could walk by, so he instead stashed that bit of information into his head to ask about later.

“Why don’t you all come inside?” Joyce finally said, positively beaming. “We haven’t got a party or anything, but it might be nice to get out of the cold.”

“Oh, yeah. Indiana Winters. Do not miss those.” Steve nodded, as Dustin started rambling to him about what had happened while he was gone.

As everyone started heading inside, El squeezed Mike’s hand and whispered, “Hey, we need a meeting. When are you free?”

“Not at all today.” he said back. “But if we all sneak out at night, we might be able to make it.”

“That’s the plan, then.”

“Hey, nerds!” Dustin called from the doorway. “You just gonna stand out there or are you gonna help me raid the kitchen?”

Everyone had settled into the kitchen after a while, with Jonathan still telling Joyce about College, and Steve and Nancy having a mock-argument over some sports thing. Mike, Will, and Dustin had settled into a lively discussion about the new *Star Wars* , while El simply watched.

Finally, Will said, “Are you gonna say anything, El?”

They turned to her, and Mike added, “Yeah, you always have good opinions on these movies.”

El shook her head. “Sorry. Just... thinking.”

“Are you okay?” Mike asked worriedly.

“Yeah, yeah, just-”

“Oh, hey, Mike!” Mike turned, seeing that Nancy and Steve were now facing them, and Nancy was taking advantage of a lull in Jonathan and Joyce’s conversation to bring up a subject. “Are you guys still doing that superhero thing?”

Before Mike could answer, Dustin said, “It’s not a ‘superhero thing’, Nancy, *gosh*, we’re actually vigilantes. And we’re *fucking great at it!*”

The teens glanced to each other, sharing an odd look. Mike said, very quickly, “Yeah, Dustin’s right. We’re great.”

“We tried mixing my colors again.” Will said. “Didn’t quite work, but I’m getting better at not blowing stuff up.”

“Yeah!” El nodded. “He only hit the weapons wall *once* .”

“Ooh, yeah.” Mike nodded, remembering how quickly he’d had to summon his Field to keep the flying items from hitting them. That wasn’t that fun.

Joyce gave them an odd look. “Sorry, when did *that* happen?”

“Uh, when you weren’t... around.” Dustin said. “We kinda were

doing homework in the Castle, and... got distracted.”

Joyce gave them a look, as Jonathan said, “Mom, you and the Chief are still keeping an eye on them, right?”

“Oh, of course.” Joyce nodded. “You wouldn’t *believe* the crap these kids still get up to.”

“Any of you died yet?” Steve asked.

“I don’t *think* so.” Dustin sighed.

The conversation shifted sometime after that, to a story Steve had about something that happened at a College Party. After about a minute, though, Nancy walked over to the kids, and asked quietly, “Hey, Mike? Can I... talk to you for a minute?”

Mike glanced towards El, who was enraptured by whatever Steve was saying, and then towards Will and Dustin, who were starting to shove candy off of a bowl on the counter into their pockets while nobody else was looking. He nodded and slid off the chair, following his sister into another room.

Nancy moved to close the door, as Mike asked, “Are... are you okay?”

“Of course, I...” Nancy stared at Mike, giving him a cautious look. She was silent for a minute, and then she said, “Look, have... have you been doing alright with your powers since... since I left?”

Mike glanced down at the ground, shrugging. “Yeah, yeah. Been alright for a few years. You know that.”

“Yeah, but, uh...” Nancy considered, trying to figure out how to word her thoughts. “Well, I just... I know that you’ve had a harder time adjusting than me from... I mean, it was *seven* years ago, but still...”

God, did she have to bring that up? “Yeah, I know.”

“But you haven’t had, like, flashbacks?”

“Not in a while.”

“Panic attacks?”

Mike felt a sudden flare in his chest, and he froze, thinking back to their last outing, to the feelings he'd felt when that girl had told him that *something worse was coming*.

“Mike?”

Shit. He couldn't say *no* now, could he? He glanced up at his worried sister, and he said, “Uh, not... not because of my powers, no.”

Nancy sighed, before saying, “Is... is it from what Mom and Dad say?” Mike hesitated. “They... they still don't know, do they?”

“Oh, no.” Mike shook his head. “Of course not. No.”

“And I know I'm not there to distract them, but, like, you know you...” She paused, glancing towards the door, and then she said, “You know it's only two more years, right? Two more years and then you're out.”

Mike glanced towards the door, too, and then he lowered his voice, asking, “How is it?”

“How's what?”

“You know... being at College. Not having to hear all the shit the local news throws at us.”

Nancy considered. “Well, you're still gonna hear it. People are gonna hate- they're gonna *fear* - people like... like you. But there's a lot less of it. I can go *days* without hearing that propaganda. And I can do what I want. When I'm not in classes, I'll just go sit in the field and listen to how *quiet* it can be. It's really freeing, Mike. I think you'll love it.”

He smiled at her, and she threw an arm around him. “Now,” she said, grinning, “How're you and El?”

“I... I think we're pretty good.” Mike said, grinning. “I mean, still good. She's... she's *so amazing*, Nance.”

“Nice. Tell her that all the time.” Nancy said.

“Are you trying to give me *romantic advice*?”

“I’m your big sister, I have to.”

“You haven’t done this before, what’s with the sudden interest?”

“I dunno, maybe having two boyfriends to deal with had something to do with it.” Nancy smiled. “Now, where’s your next date?”

“Uh, we were thinking about going to the arcade opening tomorrow.”

Nancy shook her head quickly. “No, no. Opening Night’ll be crowded as hell. Just go out to dinner and then, I dunno, see a movie.”

“We just saw a movie last weekend.”

“See it again. You’ll have less of a crowd and can make out in the back.”

“What? What, no-”

Nancy laughed, squeezing him a bit closer to her. Mike did let out a quick smile, but, as he glanced towards the door, he let his voice drop to a more serious tone. “Nance?”

“Yeah?”

Mike glanced around again, making sure nobody was around, before asking, “It’s about... about the accident.”

Nancy’s face fell. “Yeah?”

He hesitated, and then quickly asked, “Do you think anything could be worse than that?”

She stared at him for a long, long time, her face completely unreadable. Finally, she said, “Mike, are you... *sure* you’re okay?”

Before Mike could respond, the door opened, and El peered through. “Hey?” she asked. “We need you. Steve and Dustin are gonna start throwing shit at each other if you don’t chill them out.”

“Uh, alright.” Nancy said, a smile leaping onto her face alarmingly quickly. “Just having some sibling talk.”

“Yeah, uh...” Mike hesitated, and then said, “Let’s go.”

They walked out of the room, then, and Mike didn’t think to bring up his question again.

7. Late Night Meetings always give the Best Ideas

CHAPTER SEVEN

Late Night Meetings always give the Best Ideas

“This better be good, Hopper.” Max said, as her and Dustin landed on the mattress and glared up at the rest of the Party.

El had everyone gathered around the table, nervously holding Mike’s hand as she waited for everyone to sit down.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe how hard it is to sneak out at night.” Dustin said. “Mom was asleep in the Living Room and we’ve got three cats, Max had to speedmode just for us to get to the fucking door.”

“Yeah, why couldn’t we do this earlier today?” Max asked, moving to sit by Lucas. Her boyfriend was staring at her- or, more specifically, her *hair* . She almost exclusively wore her hair down, letting it fall over her shoulders and across her back, refusing to let anybody touch it. However, right now her hair was in two simple braids, completely tied out of her face.

Max caught Lucas staring, and quickly said, “Look, braiding makes it easier to brush. Shut up.”

“I wasn’t...” Lucas said.

“Seriously, though,” Will asked, “Why are we here? If Mom and Jonathan find out I’m gone, they’re gonna *freak* .”

“It’s uh...” El said, waiting until Dustin and Max sat down. “It’s about the Mystery Girl.”

“Speaking of which, we need a better name for her.” Mike said, as Dustin and Will jumped.

“I was thinking ‘Shadow’.” Max said. “Cause, you know, she’s in all

black.”

“She *can’t* be all black.” Will insisted. “None of us are all one color.”

“Uh, actually...” El said. “She, uh... she is.”

They stared at her for a second, and then Dustin said, “Wait, so you actually found her? You got to her?”

“Did you send her out?” Mike asked Dustin with a quiet look.

“Shadow Girl was spotted.” Will said quietly. “So we sent El out to make sure she was okay.”

El said, “I wanted to tell you earlier, but Nancy and Jonathan and Steve came back and I didn’t want you all to have to sneak away from them... but, uh, I we did talk.”

“Really?” Lucas said excitedly.

“You *talked to her?*” Max asked.

El bit her lip, staring down at the table. Mike waited until the others calmed down a second, before he said, “How did it go?”

“Not... great.” El continued. “She... she’s the one who blew up the store.”

They all fell silent, staring at her in horror. “She did *what?*” Dustin asked.

Will once again glanced at the ground, obviously thinking. Mike gave him a quick glance, about to ask something, when El kept going.

“And I... she said that she had a reason for blowing it up and she didn’t think it was *worth it* to tell us, and to... to stay out of her way.”

“Just what we needed.” Max groaned. “A Supervillain.”

“Well, I mean... we never did have an antagonist before.” Dustin said. “Maybe it would be cool.”

“*Cool?*” Lucas stared at him. “Dustin, she’s running around *blowing*

shit up!"

"Do you know *anything* about what she's planning?" Mike asked.

El hesitated. "She... told me to stay away from the new Arcade."

"Well, that should be a given. You all won't go *near* one." Max said, very miffed- the fact that Will was the only one still comfortable in a building that had once been her home was a bit of a sore subject.

"Well, I mean..." Mike considered. "We can do that, if she-"

"No, no, we should definitely go." Lucas said. "She's definitely going to blow it up again, we've gotta stop her, God knows who's gonna be in there."

"Do you know what powers she's got?" Will asked cautiously.

El hesitated. "I think... flight? She jumped over me."

"Okay, so we're going to need someone watching the skies." Lucas said, considering. "We're going to want somebody on the ground, too, and someone inside..."

"Me and Mike can go in." El volunteered, glancing at her boyfriend. "We were going anyway. That okay?"

Mike hesitated, and then nodded. "Yeah. Might be crowded though."

"When's the opening?" Dustin asked.

"Around Six. So that the kids can get in after school." Mike responded.

"Okay. We'll show up early, then. Sneak in the back, see if she's planted explosives." Lucas said. "Mike and El go in as civilians. Max and I'll stay out around front. Dustin, you stay up, electrocute anyone who flies in. Will, stay with him and make sure he doesn't die or anything."

"Sounds like a plan." Dustin shrugged.

“Yeah. I think we could handle that.” Max nodded.

Mike and Will both glanced away as they nodded, lost in thought. El also nodded, though she looked a bit more concerned.

“Alright, then.” Lucas said. “Let’s catch a Shadow.”

Mike woke up in the morning to a shouting match.

God, he thought. I missed Nancy.

“You are *not* going out dressed like that!”

“I’m twenty goddamn years old, I can dress how I like!”

Mike slowly sat up, grabbing his phone and sending out a text. - *Nancy and my Mom are having a fight. Quite entertaining.*

He got a text back very quickly. - *Sounds fun. Send me highlights.*

- *Will do.*

It was a few minutes before Mike was awake and made it into the kitchen, but the fight was still going on. Nancy was wearing a skirt deemed too short- though Mike honestly didn’t think it mattered, but what did he know about fashion? He didn’t exactly want to stay throughout the whole fight, but it was nice being unnoticed. He simply grabbed his breakfast and carried it back to his room. On his way, he knocked on Holly’s door, asking, “You okay?”

“Yep!” was the cheery reply. “I’m eating cake for breakfast!”

“Nice!” Mike said. “Hide the plate under your mattress when Mom comes to take you to school, and put it in the dishwasher when she’s watching TV.”

“Thanks!”

“What are big brothers for?”

Mike went back to his room, eating his eggs-and-syrup while packing

up. By the time he was finished, the angry words had died down a little, but he still managed to throw his bag under his shoulder and get out the door before anyone could acknowledge he existed.

“So,” Mike said, jumping in the passenger seat, “Where are we going first?”

El stayed silent for a minute, watching the other students filtering out of the school building. It always unnerved her that so many children could be in one building and not end up all squeezed together, or end up trying to kill each other. But that wasn't her biggest worry, oh no.

“We're...” El said quietly, as she started the car, “We're going straight to the Arcade.”

“You wanna just sit there for a few hours?” Mike asked hesitantly.

El shook her head. “I think she's going in early.”

“You do?”

“She said...” El took a deep breath. “She said the people in the store deserved it. So she's focused on justice. But she's not evil. She seemed upset when I mentioned the innocents in the store. And, well, if she was going to do something to the arcade, I don't think she'd want a bunch of kids there.”

“So you think she'll blow it up before?” Mike asked.

El nodded. “So I'm going in. You can watch outside-”

“Fuck no.” Mike shook his head. “I'm going in with you.”

El slowly glanced towards him, and then nodded again. She'd expected as much. No matter what dangerous shit she'd wanted to do, he'd always been right next to her, refusing to leave her side. So if she was going to go confront another vigilante, she figured he'd be there. Still, she had wanted to give him an out. She hated throwing him into trouble.

“Well, then,” El said, as she pulled the car from *Park* to *Drive*, “Let’s go.”

8. El and Mike cause More Problems than they thought they would

CHAPTER EIGHT

El and Mike cause More Problems than they thought they would

Lucas was dumping his bag onto his bed, glancing occasionally at his phone. He wanted to make sure if something happened ahead of time, and Dustin decided to text him about a notification he received from the supercomputer, he'd be able to notice. One time he'd left his phone on his desk for five minutes when he went to make Erica popcorn, and when he got back, Dustin had texted him twelve times about an emergency that he had to leave *now* for. He'd had to hear about how he was "always late" for *weeks* after that.

As he finished dropping his stuff, and started filling his backpack with energy bars he kept on his shelf, his door flung open. Lucas jumped, whipping around, and saw Erica burst in, yelling, "Lucas, you're never gonna believe this!"

"Jesus *fuck*, Erica, learn to *knock*!" Lucas yelled.

Erica shrugged, moving to jump and sit down on his bed, saying, "Anyway, this girl at school—" However, she stopped, noticing all of Lucas's books on his bed. "What's all this junk?"

"Nothing. I need my bag for a thing." Lucas rolled his eyes.

Erica paused. "Is this, like, a *date* thing, or a *superhero* thing?"

"Doesn't matter to you. Get out of my room!"

Erica gave him a look. "Oooh, can I come?"

"*Absolutely not!*"

Erica glanced up at the ceiling, considering. "Sounded more scared than annoyed. Definitely a superhero thing. Come on, spill. Unless

you want me to tell Mom where you're going."

Lucas knew that she wouldn't *dare* - at least, he *hoped* she wouldn't dare. She'd kept his secret ever since he'd broken in through her window about a year and a half ago, still transformed, after a late-night mission. But, well...

"Listen, there's another powered kid running around, possibly blowing things up." Lucas said. "We're taking care of it."

"Blowing things up?" Erica asked, eyes wide. "Like, 'nuclear' or..." her eyes went wide. "Like the store?"

It took Lucas a second to remember that her friend had been there. "Yeah. And while we're at it, tell your buddy that she really freaked out Mike. She did that cryptic future vision bullshit, and gave him a panic attack."

"She can't control that! We're working on it!" Erica huffed.

"Okay, so I'm just gonna pack up and check out the spot we think she might hit next. You stay home and don't get into any trouble!"

"I wanna help!" Erica said, jumping to her feet. "You know my powers are getting better, I can-"

"No!" Lucas said. "No, it's too dangerous. We still don't really know what this girl can do, and you're only twelve."

"You were, like, *ten* when you started running around fighting shit." Erica argued.

"Yeah, because we were fucking morons." Lucas sighed. "You've gotta wait a few years before you start running around risking your life for a job that you could get *fucking arrested* for."

"I'm, like, twelve. I can't get arrested."

"Yeah, you can. Especially if they find out you're powered." Lucas said. "If someone... untrustworthy found that out, you're pretty much considered nonhuman, Erica. You're a monster that's gonna be arrested and sent God-Knows-Where for *existing*."

“They wouldn’t catch me.”

“They caught *Will*, and he’s the most overpowered one of us, they could catch you-”

Lucas froze, as soon as he realized what he’d said. He stared in horror at his sister, who simply looked confused.

“What do you mean, ‘they caught Will’?”

Shit. Shit. *Shit*. He’d managed to keep *that* secret for four years, and he wasn’t going to reveal it *now*. Except, well, maybe he *did*. *Fuck*.

At that moment, thankfully, his phone buzzed. He rushed to his desk, picking it up, and then he froze.

It was a text from Max.

- *We need to talk NOW. I’ll meet you outside.*

Lucas shoved his phone into his pocket, not even bothering to grab his bag as he rushed out the door, calling over his shoulder, “Emergency. *Stay here!*”

“What emergency?” Erica called. “What’s going on?”

Lucas left without a response. Erica huffed for a minute, and then decided to go through her brother’s stuff.

“Should we knock?” Mike asked, standing in front of the Arcade door.

Nobody was there yet; it was supposed to be a lowkey opening, anyway, it wasn’t as if there would be a party. Still, a lot of parents would probably send their kids to the arcade later that day to try and trick them into socializing, or little kids would go to see what kind of prizes they could win. There could be a ton of people there later. A ton of people who could get hurt.

“I think we should sneak in, look around for a bit, then transform in a

bathroom and hide out inside.” El suggested.

“Alright.” El moved around to the side of the building, finding a window on the side. She reached onto it, shutting her eyes and focusing on the lock. As she flipped it over with her mind, she pulled up the latch, glancing inside the building. None of the workers seemed to be there yet- that was a bit off. But, well, it made it easier for them.

El climbed in first, with Mike sneaking in after her. They glanced around the room; it was pretty impressive, they had to admit. The Arcade games looked very new, and the lights were already on, shining the room in neon lighting that somehow didn’t quite hurt their eyes.

“Wow.” Mike said. “If we didn’t have trauma based around specific locations like this, this might be a cool place to hang out.”

El nodded, before to the nearest door, peering in. “Closet.” she announced.

There were too more doors, on two more walls. “Should we split up?” Mike suggested. El gave him a look, and he said, “You’re right. Dumb plan. We’ll go out the right and circle around the building? Okay.”

El grabbed his hand, and the two wandered through the door.

The building was eerily empty- again, two hours to opening, you’d think that more people would be there. “Do you think something’s wrong?” Mike asked.

“Maybe it’s... understaffed.” El suggested.

“Still...” Mike said. He paused, and then said, “Maybe we should find somewhere to transform.”

“Or,” El shrugged, “We could have ‘plausible deniability’ and claim we got lost.”

“And climbed in through the window?”

“Don’t kids do that?”

“Yeah, but they shouldn’t.”

“Hmm.”

They finally passed through into the original room, and Mike said, “Why don’t we try those stairs we saw earlier, go up to the next floor?”

“Maybe she’s not here.” El said. “I might be wrong.”

“Still worth it to check.” Mike shrugged. “Besides, espionage is the most fun date.”

“Yeah. Almost getting arrested. Romantic.” El smiled. She moved to go, though Mike paused, glancing at the closet. “Something wrong?”

“I dunno... still feel like we should transform. If we get caught in a fight, we don’t want to be recognized.”

El sighed. “That’s fair. But let’s hurry it up.”

At first, the second floor was just as boring- El was starting to think they’d transformed for nothing, and even Mike- *Paladin*, God, did she hate having fake names- seemed a little disappointed. They did manage to hear voices, though, from behind a door- it sounded like a lot of people, and none of them sounded like the Shadow.

“Probably a company meeting.” Paladin muttered. “Last minute chance to remind the employees to follow the rules and shit.”

El nodded, though she was still a little suspicious. Something just felt wrong, but she couldn’t pinpoint what.

They opened a few doors, peering slowly in and thankfully not running into anybody. Eventually, Paladin fell behind, still glancing in the direction of the conference hall in case the door should open. El went forwards, listening at one door, moving her hand to the doorknob.

And then she heard something slam shut inside.

She froze, turning towards Paladin and waving her hand wildly. Paladin caught notice and then rushed forwards, standing beside her. They met eyes, a silent conversation going on between them. Finally, he raised his hands, and she threw open the door.

They stood in the doorway for a second, staring ahead. The Shadow was *there*, her hands in a filing cabinet, dragging out papers, and she whipped around, staring at them.

The three powered kids looked at each other for several moments, and then Shadow said, "I told you to stay away."

"Stand down." Paladin said, raising his hands again. "Nobody has to get hurt, we just want to talk."

"It's too late for that." Shadow shook her head, and then she reached into her pocket- holy *shit*. How come *her* outfit had pockets? El was momentarily distracted, her mind somehow hyperfocusing on how unfair it was that *she* had built-in pockets and none of them did.

And then Shadow pulled out a match, struck it against the wall, and set fire to the filing cabinet.

Huh. That was a bit more of a problem.

"What the *fuck*?" Paladin said, a bit too loudly.

"Sorry, kids, this is grown-up stuff. Go play somewhere else." the girl said, and then she rushed to the window, leaping out.

El hesitated for only an instant, and then rushed towards the filing cabinet, wondering how best to put out the fire. The papers were all in flames- it would be too late to save most of them. But maybe she could still...

"El!"

She whipped around as Paladin rushed forwards, grabbing her arm and pulling her to the window.

“What?” she asked.

Before he could respond, she spotted what he did; there were more flames, spreading down the hall, now blocking their way to the door.

“How the *fuck* did she set that?” Paladin asked.

“She must have had an explosive or something, or maybe she set another room on fire. We have to-” El began.

The filing cabinet suddenly toppled, crashing to the ground. The flames were a bit too close now. El grabbed onto Mike’s arm, dragging him out the window as fast as she could. They were, unfortunately, several feet from the ground, but, much more thankfully, El could manage to levitate the two of them. She grabbed onto Mike, too, and toppled out the window with him, using her mind to focus on the two of them, dropping them to the ground.

As they landed softly, El pulled away, turning around. “The people inside, we have to-”

She froze, then. Because Mike was staring ahead, a blank look on his face.

“Mike? Is something wrong?”

He slowly turned towards her, and after a second, he shut his eyes and shook his head. “It’s nothing. Let’s get back in-”

“*Michael Wheeler!*”

Paladin jumped as Zoomer appeared behind them, gripping onto Lucas, Will, and Dustin- they, apparently, had not seen fit to transform.

“And *Jane Hopper!*” Zoomer added, glaring at them. “What in the *hell* are you doing?”

“I told you they’d be here.” Will said quietly. “I knew they’d show up early-”

“You didn’t tell us that they’d set the building on fire!” Lucas said.

“Shadow came early.” Paladin said. “She set the fire, we had to-”

“Fuck it, nevermind.” Zoomer sighed, as she released the other boys. “Get them to Castle Byers, explain what just happened. I’ll get everybody out.”

“Will you-” Lucas began.

Before he could finish, Zoomer rushed off, leaving them in the blink of an eye.

They stared at each other, and then Will said, very quietly, “Come on. We’re going.”

“We could’ve handled it.” Paladin argued. “Hell, if we *hadn’t* gotten in there-”

“That’s not what we’re worried about!” Lucas yelled. “Dustin just got an alert...”

“Not here.” Dustin interrupted. “Come on. Castle Byers. *Now*.”

9. Talking about Shadows

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys, is there a reason you're not leaving that many comments anymore? I wanna know if I did something or whatever. I really like hearing your thoughts and stuff

CHAPTER NINE

Talking about Shadows

Mike clapped his hands, detransforming, as he asked, "Alright, are you going to tell us what the *fuck* is going on, or do we have to guess?"

The other boys glanced at each other, as El sat down, pulling her hair back into a quick ponytail. "Well..." Will began. "Dustin got a message from Computer."

"It's about the Mystery Girl." Dustin said, pulling out his phone and sitting at the table. Before he could continue, they heard a *thud*, and turned to see Max landing on the mattress.

"Everyone's alive." Max said, standing up and shrugging. "How much did you tell them?"

"Nothing, because we've only had ten minutes to get here." Lucas said.

"That's an *eternity*, you couldn't have talked on the way?"

"We didn't want to be overheard."

"In the woods? Nobody ever comes here."

"Let's stop arguing about when you should have told us," Mike huffed, "And tell us *now*."

“It’s... it’s about...” Lucas began. “Dustin, why don’t you...”

Dustin hesitated, before saying, “So... the Shadow girl is... registered.”

They all froze, staring. “Registry” was a word they tried to avoid using, because it made them all incredibly anxious. They’d all heard that word before- the word that was used to describe kids with powers who’d been caught. “This girl has been registered. Watch out for her.” “This boy has been registered. You won’t see him again.” It meant that the government knew who they were, knew what they could *do* . And it meant that they’d be hunted, and caught, and shipped off God knew where- the kids suspected back to the Lab, but that had been “officially” shut down for a few years, so who knew what was going on.

“How did you find this out?” Mike asked quietly.

“Computer picked her up on an online database.” Dustin explained quietly. “Apparently someone recognized her- she’s been in a couple cities before, apparently. She’s destroyed a shitton of places.”

“Do they have anything in common?” El asked, considering.

“What?”

“The places.”

Dustin shook his head. “Movie Theaters, Banks, Apartments... they’re not owned by the same people, built by the same people, anything. At least, not from what I’ve got here.”

“I can do more research on that.” Will suggested.

“Do they know who she is?” Mike asked.

“Fortunately for her, no.” Dustin said.

“Then how is she...” Mike said. “You know, registered?”

“Well, they’ve spotted her while transformed.” Dustin said. “They don’t have a cool name for her, though, she’s just ‘Suspect’ with a

couple numbers after. It seems like she's *really* pissed off the government, though, because she keeps getting away from them after destroying their shit."

"Okay, so they know who she is." Mike said, glancing between everyone. "What does that have to do with us?"

"Yeah. Why'd you drag us away from a mission for this?" El asked.

The others stared at them, until Will said, "Because, if they know who she is- *and* she's been spotted in the area- *they're going to come after her.* "

El immediately reached over, gripping onto Mike's hand and paling.

They're going to come after her.

And they all understood the implication of that.

There's a good chance that we'll get caught in the crossfire.

"What do we do?" Mike asked.

"Well, for starters, we don't want to completely leave her alone." Lucas said. "Or else, who knows what she'll do while we're not looking."

"Like set an Arcade on fire?" El asked quietly.

"Yeah." Lucas nodded. "Will, you said you wanted to research the buildings she's hit?"

Will nodded. "There's gotta be a connection. If she thinks she's delivering vigilante justice, there's gotta be a connection somewhere."

"I can do more research on her specifically." Dustin said. "Computer can help me break into some classified files, too."

"You never mentioned that." Lucas said.

"If she comes back, I can be in charge of getting everyone to her

location.” Max said. “And I can help with Dustin’s research.”

“El and I can try to talk her down again.” Mike said, glancing to El, who nodded. “If we can get her to chill, figure out how to get her to stop...”

“Dustin?” El asked. “Did... does it say what her powers are?”

Dustin shook his head. “Just that she’s got a power that allows her to transform, so it’s probably not mental or physical- I’d say combat or defense-oriented.”

Mike felt a buzz in his pocket, and he pulled out his phone, frowning. “Nancy needs to see me.” he said. “Do you guys need me to stay?”

They shook their heads. “Go hang with your sister.” Lucas said. “We’ll figure this out.”

“But you’ll tell me about anything new?”

“Of course.”

Mike gave El a quick kiss, and then rushed off, waving to everyone else.

The second he was gone, El said, “Guys, I’m worried about Mike.”

“What do you mean?” Max asked, turning.

“He kinda... zoned out during the fire.” she said. “I think it... it might have been the heat.”

There was a tense silence, before Will said, “Should we try the therapy again? His PTSD might be acting up.”

“It’s probably because of the added stress of the new girl.” Lucas said. “And the whole... thing at the store.”

“You know he’ll flip if we suggest getting help, though.” Dustin added. “He hates asking for it.”

“I’ll try talking to him.” El said. “But... I hope he listens.”

Max sat up, grabbing her buzzing phone off her desk. She pushed a strand of hair out of her face, grinning as she saw who was calling. She answered, quickly saying, "Hey, Lucas! What's up?"

"Hey, Max! I was, uh... I've got some extra cash from watching Erica yesterday, and I was wondering if you wanted to like... go out?"

"On a date?"

"Well, uh, I, uh, well-"

"Lucas, we're already a couple. You don't have to awkwardly ask me out on dates." She laughed a little, and then she let her voice drop more seriously. "But what's this about?"

"What do you mean?"

"You like planning things out, Sinclair. This is a bit... spontaneous. And if you got extra money for a date, you'd have told me before now."

There was a pause, and then Lucas said, "Uh, I might've... let slip to Erica that Will got abducted a while ago and... I *really* don't want to have to explain that away to her."

"So you're using me as an excuse?"

"What? No! No! No! I-"

"I'm just messing with you, Lucas." Max sighed. "You want me to come over? I can distract her for long enough that she'll leave you alone, or if she's insistent, I can help you come up with a good excuse."

"Really?" he sounded so hopeful.

Max beamed. "Yeah. You know Erica loves me. I can help out for a bit."

"Would you?"

“Of course! Plus, I get to see *you* for a bit longer today. Be right there.”

She hung up then, calling, “Hey, Dustin! I’m going out with Lucas!” He didn’t respond, so she just grabbed her bag off the ground and rushed off, shoving her phone in her pocket.

“What’s up?” Mike asked.

Nancy was sitting outside the apartment building, throwing a stress ball into the air and catching it repeatedly.

“Did, uh... did you need something?”

Nancy turned around, glancing at Mike, and said, “Mike, do you... do you think something’s wrong with us?”

Mike hesitated, and then slid down next to her, sitting against the wall. “What’s going on?” he asked again.

“It’s just...” Nancy sighed. “I... I know that the incident doesn’t affect me as much as it does- did? does?- as much as it hit you. But...”

“Nancy...” Mike asked, eyes wide. “Did you have a flashback, or...”

“No, no, I don’t think so, it’s...” she groaned. “It’s stupid.”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

“My... I was...” she sighed. “I was walking home from seeing Jonathan and happened to be on time to walk Holly home, texted Mom to let her know, and she wanted to go through the street where... of course she wouldn’t remember, she was so young when it happened, but we passed that house. We passed that house and I *flipped* . I made her run home and then I locked myself in my room for an hour and I don’t even know what to say to her...”

They were silent for a bit longer, and then Mike said, “If it makes you feel better, I still can’t go down that street, either.”

Nancy let out a laugh, and then mimed raising a glass. “Here’s to being fucked up!”

“Nancy, I can’t drink yet.” Mike joked, elbowing her a little.

“Neither can I. But it’s pretty hard to get drunk on air, so we might as well.”

Mike laughed at that, and Nancy joined in, and soon the two siblings were laughing together, trying to push their bad memories to the backs of their minds.

They didn’t quite succeed, but it was a good try.

Notes for the Chapter:

update: sorry I couldn't post today, Easter celebrations were a lot longer than I thought they would be. see you tomorrow

10. Everyone has Deep Conversations while Will does some Research

CHAPTER TEN

Everyone has Deep Conversations while Will does some Research

When Will said he was going to do research, he dedicated himself to his research.

After he'd gotten out of the Lab four years ago- an incident he only really talked about to his Mom and Jonathan, now, since the other kids seemed to only mention it when necessary- he'd had a certain... *interest* in any other kids with powers. He'd become convinced that the Lab- or places like it- were where registered powered kids were sent. So he'd done his research, looking up any powered kids that may have been abducted, requesting that Dustin send him files on registered children, learning everything he could about the genetic chances of powers happening.

He'd been a lot happier than the other kids when Dustin and Max announced the email- he knew what it was like to be a powered kid in trouble, and if they could help somebody... but he'd been worried, too. Should someone find their email, find out who set it up...

But he couldn't think about that right now. He had research to do on the Shadow's previous targets, and he was going to do it.

Dustin had texted him a list, one that he'd gotten from the government report. So, Will opened his computer- well, it was Jonathan's for a long while, and wasn't new by *any* means, but since Jonathan managed to get one at NYU, Will got the old laptop and could use it *whenever* he wanted- and opened up the incognito mode. While most incognito windows still didn't hide his browsing information from employers, internet service providers and whatever government agency spied on his computer, his Mom and Hopper had tinkered with it a bit- apparently they had a lot of experience hiding things from the government. So he could research whatever he

wanted. They'd done the same to the phones and computers of the rest of the Party, and Mike, as a writer, was the most pleased about this upgrade: now he could search up how to commit murder without having to explain to the FBI that it was for a story.

Will opened about thirty tabs, using each one to research the different buildings that had been destroyed by the Shadow. After spending two hours making notes and scrolling through article after article, Will was starting to wonder if Dustin was right. Nothing seemed connected between any of the places.

He sat there, looking at his papers- for each building, he wrote the size, purpose, owner, company, any category he could think of. None of them were consistent enough to be an explanation.

As he still puzzled, he heard a knock at his door. "Shit." he muttered, gathering his papers and quickly shoving them under his bed, before closing the laptop and saying, "Come on in!"

The door opened, and Jonathan peered in. "Hey!"

"Hi!" Will grinned, "What's up?"

"Just wanted to check in." Jonathan said, moving to sit by Will. "Heard you and your friends set something on fire today."

"*Ugh*, no, that was our new friend." Will sighed. "And Mike and El were the only ones there. We picked them up and Max got the other people out."

"Yeah, and they weren't too happy about that." Jonathan sighed. "Did you... hear what they told the media?"

"No, and from your tone of voice, I don't think I want to." Will groaned. "We saved their fucking lives."

"That's not how people are gonna see it, especially since they probably don't know who started the fire yet." Jonathan said. "Speaking of which, *who'd* you say your friend was?"

Will sighed. "It's not a problem, really. Just some new powered kid who thinks she's doing vigilante justice, don't worry about it."

“Isn’t that what you guys are doing?”

“We’re not *setting things on fire*, Jonathan!”

“Okay, okay...” Jonathan sighed. “So, like, is this person your supervillain now?”

“We don’t have supervillains, Jonathan.” Will sighed. “This isn’t a comic book. I think she’s just... confused and... shit, I don’t know. I don’t know what she’s thinking. I’m not a telepath.”

“Ooh, you’re right, your team needs a telepath.” Jonathan joked.

“Yeah, *right*, we’ll get Lucas’s Mom in on it.”

“Hey, if *our* Mom can run around as a superhero, I think Lucas’s Mom can do the same.”

Will laughed a little, and then said, “Well, Lucas’s parents *still* don’t know what he’s doing with us, so it might be an odd recruitment.”

“They don’t?”

“Our Mom’s the only parent in the group who has any idea.”

Jonathan paused. “I feel like that should be a problem.”

“We’re sixteen, Jonathan. Basically adults.”

“Oh, Lord, no you’re not.”

Will laughed with his brother for a bit, and then Jonathan said, “Well, if you need anything, let me know. I can... summon you something out of a photo, I don’t know.”

“You sure you don’t wanna come out with us?” Will asked quietly. “I mean, we can probably teach you how to transform.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I’ll leave that to the professionals.”

After Jonathan left, Will pulled out his papers, and his laptop, and got back to work.

“Hey, Kal, I’m borrowing your sweater!” El yelled, bursting into her sister’s room.

Kali jumped, looking up from her phone, as El rushed to the closet.
“What? Why?”

“I need to cut it up.”

“That’s not *borrowing*, and *no, you can’t have it!*”

El turned around, a pout on her face, saying, “But *Kal*, it’s for a craft project!”

“Which project is this?”

“I wanna try and make a blanket out of old clothes.”

“That sweater is new.”

“If it’s been here a week, it’s old.”

“You’re *not* taking it.”

El groaned.

“So,” Kali continued, as El began to leave, “Who started the fire?”

El stopped, let out a groan, and flopped over on Kali’s bed. “How’d you hear about that?”

“Hopper called. You’re probably not gonna be in any *deep* shit, but you didn’t cause too much damage, and if you have a good enough excuse...”

“Well, it wasn’t me, for starters.” El said. “It was the Shadow.”

There was a long, awkward pause, before she said, “The what?”

“Shit.” El suddenly remembered that it wasn’t her official name. “That’s what we’ve called her. She’s another powered girl. She... likes destroying things.”

“Hmm, why?”

El shrugged. “Decided not to tell us.”

“Sounds like a bitch.”

“I don’t know.” El thought. “She sounds like she has a reason for what she’s doing. Be nice to know what it is.”

There was a pause, as Kali stared blankly at her phone, no longer reading what it said, as El looked up at the ceiling. Then, El asked, “Can I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“When you were... on the run...” Kali flinched, and El slowly continued. “Did you ever run into other powered kids?”

Kali was silent for so long that El feared she wouldn’t say anything, and then she said, “Of course we did.” She let out a long sigh. “We couldn’t get any of them to join us, though. I think I freaked them out, with tales of being kidnapped and locked away in a Lab. The others might’ve scared them too- non-powered rebels who like vengeance a bit more than the normal person. And if we got one who was interested, they’d get arrested soon after while we were somewhere else.”

“There were a lot?” El asked quietly.

“Well, not as much as you’d think, but we’d find them every three or four towns.” Kali shrugged. “Lots of kids who accidentally revealed their powers and then got kicked out or ran away before they could be. None of them had escaped the... the Lab, though. I think we were the only ones.”

After another pause, El asked, “How many numbers do you think they got to?”

“Let’s not talk about them.” Kali said, rolling over so she was on her stomach next to her sister. “Let’s talk about your Shadow. What’re you gonna do about her?”

“I’d like to talk to her some more.” El said.

“And... what would you say to her?”

“I just want to know why she’s doing what she’s doing. Tell her that we can help her.”

“Help her do what?”

“Get better. Get justice another way.”

“What if... what if there is no other way?”

El sighed. “We still have to fight her. She’s hurting innocents.” She stayed silent for longer, and then she said, “So, are you *sure* I can’t-”

“You’re not grabbing my fucking sweater, go use your own.”

“Yours are better!”

“Why *are* you dating my brother?”

Max laughed a little. “Because I like him.”

Her plan had worked flawlessly so far: Erica had opted to completely ignore any questions she might have for Lucas, instead focusing on getting as much attention from Max as she could. Right now, the two girls were applying each others’ makeup- which was quite a sight, as Max rarely, if ever, wore the stuff, and Erica had only just started, meaning that they both looked like complete messes.

Still, at least Erica wasn’t asking...

“Hey, quick question.”

Shit. “Is this about Will?”

Erica narrowed her eyes. “So, you’re in on that, too?”

Max nodded a little. “Yeah. Probably shouldn’t bring that up to your brother.”

“Why? What happened?”

Max considered. What was the best way to tell her while still letting her know not to blab about it? “Uh, it... it happened a few years back. Some bad guys grabbed Will off the street after one of the Missions and tried to lock him up. He got out but... it scared us quite a bit.”

“Oh.”

There. That wasn't so hard, was it? “Yeah. So we don't talk about it.”

“That seems weird.” Erica said. “If you're so scared, wouldn't talking help? Lucas said that when I have nightmares, I should tell someone, cause if you tell someone a dream, you won't have it again.”

“Hmm, I'm not sure if that works with memories.”

“Have you tried it?”

Max paused. “We talk to each other, sometimes. But not to other people. They wouldn't get it.”

“I think my parents would. They have powers.”

“Yeah, but they weren't kidnapped for them.”

There was a bit of silence, as Erica tried (and failed) to apply eyeshadow to Max. Then, she asked, very quietly, “Would I get kidnapped for mine?”

Max desperately wanted to say “No! Of course not!” but... well, that wasn't the truth, was it?

“Maybe.” Max said slowly. “But you shouldn't be scared. Lucas would overturn Heaven and Hell for you, and we'd be right along with him. And, well, from what I've heard, you sound hard to abduct.”

“Hell yeah!” Erica nodded.

The girls continued with their makeup, and spoke no more of the matter.

Will sat back, his papers trailing a bit off the bed.

It didn't make *sense* . Nothing occurred enough to make some kind of pattern. Maybe Dustin had sent him the wrong list- wouldn't be the first time he'd sent him the wrong thing; he'd refer to *that* as the "Dissecting Frogs Incident" until the day he died. Still, each building *had* been destroyed mysteriously, in all different ways- she seemed to favor fire, but honestly, if Will wanted to destroy a building, he'd use fire as much as possible. That would destroy almost all evidence. Still, she'd used flooding, and broken support beams, and once she released wild wolves into a factory. Honestly, that last one Will could appreciate just by how creative it was, and how over the top it must have been. He got a good laugh imagining the Shadow riding a wolf into the building, shouting for revolution.

As he was reliving that image in his head, Will suddenly got a thought. He paused, before picking up one of the papers, the one with a column on the official owners of the stores. He'd just jotted down the names before, not really thinking about them, just thinking about how many buildings he had to research.

Slowly, he opened a new Incognito window, and opened a tab, typing in the first person. He started bringing up each of the people, pulling out a new sheet of paper and writing down everything about the owners.

It took two hours, and then he found it. There.

A common theme.

He grabbed his phone, and immediately sent out a group text.

- *Hey, it's late, but how about a Party Meeting tomorrow after school?*

- *I've got some new info on our Shadow.*

11. Kali gets to sit in on Six Teenagers with No Plan

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kali gets to sit in on Six Teenagers with No Plan

Max burst into Dustin's room, still brushing her hair. "Hey, I need your phone charger. Mine's busted."

"Fuck, what'd you do to it now?" Dustin asked, as Max jumped over his bed, flopping onto her stomach to plug in her phone.

"Hit it with my pocketknife by accident."

"Hey, here's an idea, stop throwing that around."

"I've got a license now, I wanna use it."

"Not in your *room*!"

"Oh, yeah, we're still doing the Castle Meeting tonight, right?" Max asked.

"Yeah. Even if Will cancels, we've got a mission to do- find the Shadow, get her to chill the fuck out..."

"Good, cause I wanna tell them about our double-powered theory."

"She's *not* double-powered, Max," Dustin rolled his eyes.

"But I still wanna bring it up!" Max rolled over onto her back, staring up at the ceiling. "It's *science*, Dustin!"

"It's only science if it's testable, and-"

"It *is* testable, physically. Just not... morally."

"Yeah, which means Lucas and Mike are gonna *love* it."

"I'm not suggesting we test it! Just that we... consider it a

possibility.”

Before they could say anything else, the door opened again, and a ginger cat rushed in, running to jump on the desk to nap.

“Oh, hey, it’s Sparkfur!”

“Would you *stop* calling Mews that?”

“Sure, when he gets his leadership ceremony.”

“*Max!*”

“I’m going out!”

Kali jumped to her feet, abandoning her studying for a second, turning to El, who was retreating out the door, a bag slung over her shoulder. “Hold on, hold on. Where are you going?”

“Party meeting. I’ll be back by noon.”

Kali paused, before asking, “Mind if I come?”

El’s face lit up. “Yeah! Yeah, of course! I just assumed you’d be too busy with school or something.”

“Fuck it. Vigilantes sound interesting.” Kali shrugged, standing up and running for her jacket, which hung on a hook in her bedroom. “Reminds me of the good old days.”

“You sound like an old guy.” El rolled her eyes. “Also, your ‘good old days’ were when you were literally on the run from the government.”

“And now I’m living with a cop. How the turntables.” Kali said. “So, who’s driving?”

“Your driving sucks.”

“Not my fault it took me seven times to pass the test.”

“Yeah, kind of is.”

“So,” Dustin asked, looking towards Will as they waited for El to arrive, “Have you tried any color combos recently?”

The Party were sitting around the table, waiting. The school day had been boringly plain, though Will had seemed a little excited throughout their classes. The one interesting moment was when Dustin and Lucas almost started a foodfight over how they interpreted the ending of *Inception*, and even then, they’d all had the Shadow kept in the back of their minds.

“The other day I stayed in the glass room and absorbed white and blue.” Will said. “I managed to summon a bit of ice before losing control and almost impaling myself on an icicle shower.”

“Do you think,” Dustin asked quietly, “If you absorbed an entire rainbow... what do you think it would do?”

Will let out a long laugh, before he said, “I mean, it might just make me more gay, but I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“I’d try *not* combining more than two.” Lucas said, though he smiled a little.

“Obviously, I’m not an *idiot*.” Will said.

“Oh, speaking of two combos-” Max began.

Before she could say something, they all heard the trap-floor activate.

“Shit.” Max muttered. “Tell you later.”

El then crashed onto the mattress, turning to beam at her friends. And then, falling after her, came Kali.

They stared for a second, as El said, “Kali’s sitting in on our meeting today.”

“Uh, cool.” Lucas said. “Did you catch her up, because I’m not stopping to explain everything.”

"I know enough." Kali said, shrugging. "Besides, I was bored today."

"Okay, we're not some kind of hangout spot, we're a vigilante team." Dustin said, sounding offended.

"Yeah, and I was a vigilante for years. I have seniority." Kali said, moving to sit on one of the chairs- thank God they had some extra. El moved to sit next to Mike, shooting him a quick grin.

"So, what's this all about, Will?" Lucas asked.

"I've got a lead." Will said, reaching into his bag and pulling out a pile of papers, throwing it onto the table with a *thump*. They all jumped at the sound, and then Will said, "I did my research last night."

"Obviously." Max said.

"At first, nothing added up." Will said, spreading the papers across the table. "As you can see here. However, I then decided to check up on the owners of each building individually, and guess what? We've got a common link!"

They all looked over, interested, as Will picked up one of the papers, laying it on top and pointing to a certain column, which was circled in red marker.

"What the fuck does 'insufficient funding' mean?" Max asked.

"It means that anyone who owned these buildings not only rarely had an interest in their buildings' purpose- at least, from what I could tell- very few of them would've had sufficient funds to buy, build, or open these buildings, at least from what their general income would be as well as their recent expenses-"

"Jesus *fuck*," Mike muttered, "You did all of this shit in a *day*?"

"I was up all night. Got two hours of sleep, maybe." Will shrugged. "But anyway, you know what that could mean?"

"They have a similar funder?" El asked.

“Bingo.”

“You have any idea who this could be?” Lucas asked.

Will shook his head, as Kali said, “But that doner could be the person our Mystery Girl is really fighting?”

“Yeah!” Will said.

“Well, that’s a good theory.” Lucas said carefully. “Was there anything else?”

“Not that I compared.” Will shook his head. “Nothing was similar enough, including construction dates, but I only researched current owners, if I could find previous ones...”

“Dude,” Mike muttered, “We need to put you on more research projects.”

“It’s fun.”

“Apparently.”

“So,” Kali asked, glancing between the kids, “What’s the game plan?”

“We’re hoping to wait until the Shadow shows up again.” Lucas said quickly. “We’re gonna try and talk her down.”

“You’re not gonna fight her?” Kali seemed surprised.

“Only if necessary.” El said.

“You sure you don’t want to fight her? I can help with that.”

“We’re not fighting her.” Mike said, as the other kids shook their heads. “Not if we can talk her out of it.”

Kali looked at them oddly, but changed the subject. “What may be useful to you is to figure out all her strengths and weaknesses.” she said. “Even if you don’t fight her, it makes for a good conversation, if you know which buttons to push and which to not. What do you know about her?”

“She thinks she’s doing something right.” Max said. “And she can fly, maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Well,” Max considered, “She jumped really high without harming herself.”

“Might just be a jumping power, or even a feat of mechanical engineering.”

“She’s very creative in how she destroys her buildings, which she’s been doing for almost three years now.” Will said.

“Any perceived weaknesses?”

“She didn’t like when I mentioned there were innocents in the building she destroyed.” El piped up. “So it’s definitely a vigilante justice thing.”

“So,” Kali said stiffly, “You know she has a moral code, and basically nothing about her powers.”

They glanced at each other for a minute, and then Lucas said, “I mean, kinda.”

“Wow.” Kali said, leaning back in her chair. “You’re all screwed.”

They talked for a little bit longer, but got absolutely nowhere. After a while, Dustin moved over to the supercomputer to program it to do its own research on the owners of the destroyed buildings, and the kids started filtering out. Will and Dustin went back to their own houses, while Kali had to go for an online class; El decided to stay behind. “Mike and I can go somewhere,” she said, shrugging, before leaning her head on her boyfriend’s shoulder. They left soon afterwards, leaving Lucas and Max, who were re-sorting the Weapons Wall- recently, the items had been falling down a lot from their perches.

“I think this goes on that side.” Max said, passing Lucas a sword.

Lucas carefully took it, placing it up. "So..." she said after a while. "Has, uh, Erica mentioned anything? About..."

Lucas shook his head. "Thanks again for talking to her about it. I'd have just messed it up."

"No, she'd've listened to you. She might not tell you, but she likes you a lot."

"I know, it's just... hard to talk about it."

They were silent for another minute, and then Max said, "Hey, uh, Dustin and I were thinking about... this thing, might be nice to get a second- sorry, third opinion on it."

"Yeah?"

Max paused, trying to think over the best way to describe her thoughts, staring into space. Lucas finally finished placing the weapons up, glancing to her with a bit of concern, before she said, "What if... what if someone had two powers?"

"More than one power?" Lucas asked. "Like Will?"

"No, no, not like Will." Max shook her head, turning to him and crossing her arms a little. "He's 'technically' got multiple powers, but it all stems from one, his Color Absorption. I mean, like, two powers that aren't the same."

Lucas was silent for a bit longer, and Max elaborated. "It kinda started while I was thinking about how... how I got my powers. You know, the weird mixture I drank. And Mike got his from an experimental explosion. You, Will, and probably Dustin got yours from birth. And I started thinking, and talking with Dustin, and like... if I had been born with powers, but still drank that mixture, what do you think would've happened?"

"You think you would've gotten two powers?"

"It's possible." Max said. "Dustin wants to find out more about how powers hook onto our genetics before we completely consider that, but there are definitely other options we've considered. The most

obvious possibility is just having two different powers- though that could still be an issue, if someone got two contradictory powers, like fire and ice. Another possibility is whatever two powers they would've had might combine- like a wind power and storm power could make a hurricane power. Or..."

"Or?"

"Or, well, it's possible that having two powers could completely overload someone and cause them to spontaneously combust."

"...Ah."

"Yeah." Max sighed. "Meaning we can't exactly test this idea. I feel like it would be pretty immoral, y'know?"

"Yeah. Pretty creepy."

"Or maybe the second power would just... overtake the first." Max said. "Replace it, you know? There's so many possibilities. But, hey, maybe someone will pick up on Dustin's email and let us know."

"Or maybe the cops'll find the email, find out who we are, and send us off to jail before that could happen." Lucas shrugged.

"Naw, Dustin and Computer are being super careful about who they allow into the email, y'know?"

"Still, just one mistake..."

"Dustin and I can also lock the email down completely. We can probably get you access."

"We should get the whole Party access."

And just like that, the thoughts of any double-powered kids were gone from their minds. And after a while, thoughts of powers were completely gone, as they ran off to go to the park so Max could show him how to skateboard.

12. Byers Family Dinner

CHAPTER TWELVE

Byers Family Dinner

The rest of the week went by in a blur, with no Shadow appearances and no more destroyed buildings.

“Maybe she left.” Max suggested, as the kids sat in Castle Byers, waiting for the adults to arrive.

“It’s possible.” Will said, thinking back to his research. “Maybe she just moved on.”

El shook her head. “She seems to think she’s sticking around. Told us to stay away from her. If she’d been leaving in a few days, I don’t feel like she’d say that.”

They were silent for a bit, and then Lucas said, “Well, what are we gonna show Hop and Ms. Byers today?”

“Shit, I dunno.” Mike said, as the others said something similar. “We haven’t really done anything new in the last few weeks, have we?”

“We can’t just show them *nothing*.” Max said.

“In that case,” Dustin said, “Should we just spar again?”

“Fuck, I guess.” Mike sighed. “Who wants to go?”

“I don’t have offensive moves.” Max shrugged. “And they know how all the weapons on the wall work, so I can’t really use those.”

“I can show them how I absorb color from my bag of stuff.” Will suggested.

“You did that last time.” Lucas said.

"I can go." Mike suggested.

"Are you sur-" El began.

Mike nodded. "I'll go. Who wants to fight?"

They glanced at each other, and then Lucas said, "I'll go, too. You okay with that?"

"Yeah."

"Are Steve and Jonathan gonna be coming?" Dustin asked, sitting on the table and kicking his feet a little. "They've come before sometimes."

"Not often." Max rolled her eyes.

"I don't think so." Will answered. "I think Jonathan's going out with Steve and Nancy today. He never liked training, either. Doesn't really want to go around fighting people, you know?"

"That's not what we do." Lucas said.

"Isn't it?"

Before any of them could think of a good response, they heard the trap-floor activate.

"Alright, let's get started." Lucas said.

Lucas's energy blast shot above Mike's head, and he ducked, barely avoiding getting hit. He whipped around, shooting out more light strands from his fingers, which Lucas leapt over, summoning an energy shelf to sit on- a block of solid energy floating above the floor.

"That's cheating!" Mike yelled, though he smiled a little.

"Nothing's cheating in a fight!" Lucas replied, before leaping off, more red energy blasts emerging.

Over in the other room, across the glass, the others watched.

“So,” Hopper said after a while, “You guys had nothing to show us?”

They all shook their heads.

“And I’m guessing you don’t have any new info on this new girl?”

They paused. Obviously El and Will had filled their parents in on the situation- it was kinda unavoidable by the point the arcade set fire- but... well, how much would they say?

“No.” Will finally said. “No new info.”

After a second, El said, “You don’t think they’ll get hurt?”

“Come on, we never get hurt when we fight each other.” Max shrugged, glancing up from her phone.

“That’s true.” El said, but she still thought.

It was true, they never got hurt while fighting each other, except for the occasional power overuse causing a knockout, but that didn’t count. Still, El wondered... if they *actually* got into a fight, if something happened between the Party... could they *actually* hurt each other?

But that wouldn’t happen. That *couldn’t* happen. She didn’t even have to think about it.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Joyce yelled, and El snapped back to reality, seeing the boys drop; Mike lowered his shields, while Lucas let his energy dissipate.

“Like the show?” Lucas joked, as he and Mike headed towards the glass, with Lucas pushing the door open.

“You guys certainly do have combat down flat.” Joyce said. “Though, well, you’ve been doing *that* a long while.”

The teens all nodded. “And we’ve been doing better on defense.” Dustin said. “Not just Mike. Will can make ice shields really well.”

“Come on, Dustin, ice isn’t the only thing I do.” Will shrugged. “My

plant shields have been going pretty good, too, and when those get hit too hard, you don't risk them turning into sharp pieces. They also don't melt when time's up."

"But ice is cooler!" Dustin paused, realized the pun, and then burst into laughter.

"I like the plants." Will muttered, moving to sit on the edge of the table. "I can add flowers and stuff."

"Oh! Tell them what you did the last time you made a flower shield." Max beamed.

Will immediately turned red, glancing towards Joyce. "Uuuh, we don't... have to..."

"He made a very rude gesture out of rose petals." Max laughed a little. "Remember that, Will?"

Will glanced towards his Mom again, and then said, "Uh..."

Joyce laughed a little, "It's fine, Will."

Will still glared at Max as she burst into more laughter.

"It didn't last very long." Will said, sitting at the table and picking at his food. "It's not like I spray-painted it onto a billboard."

"Will, we're not mad at you." Joyce said.

"Still," Will groaned, "Max didn't have to bring it up!"

"Max is pretty impulsive. She probably didn't even think about it." Jonathan shrugged.

It was pretty late- the sky had already gone dark- but Jonathan had only just returned from some kind of date, bringing some takeout for the rest of them.

"Did Hop ever do that to you while you were running around being

heroes? Embarrass you in front of your parents?" Will asked, turning to Joyce.

"Oh, there's no way my parents knew about my little escapades." Joyce sighed. "If they knew, I'd probably die before you two could exist."

The brothers glanced at each other quickly, and then Will took a deep breath, psyching himself up, before asking, "Did... did Dad know?"

Joyce flinched, which instantly made Will feel bad, but she shook her head. "No. Hell no."

"It might've been... useful, you know?" Will mumbled. "If you wanted to hide."

Joyce bit her lip, looking very awkward. "If he couldn't find me, he'd go take out his anger on some... something else."

Well, this wasn't exactly where they wanted to conversation to go.

Finally, Jonathan said, "Uh, we're going back to College at the end of the week. Will, do you want to maybe go to the Movies or something?"

"Sure." Will said flatly. "That sounds great."

He shouldn't have brought his Dad up. God, what was he thinking? Sure, they hadn't seen him in *years*, but... it wasn't as if they could just forget.

"Hey, Will?" Joyce said.

Will glanced up. "Yeah?"

"Why don't you show us your garden shield? We can go into the woods right now."

Will, against all odds, brightened a little. "Really?"

Joyce smiled and nodded. "You can even throw in a rose-petal middle finger if you want."

“Mom!”

13. Mike and Max bicker and get themselves into trouble

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mike and Max bicker and get themselves into trouble

“What are you doing here, Wheeler?”

Mike looked up, startled, to see Max slide to a stop, kicking up her skateboard and moving to sit on the bench beside him. He scanned the park, trying to see if anybody else was there but, no, it was just Max. He sighed and said, “What’re you doing here?”

“Just come this way sometimes.” Max shrugged. “But I’ve never seen you outside without a friend dragging you along.”

“Yeah, you have.”

“Not that I can think of. What’s going on?”

Mike glanced away. “Nothing. Go bother Lucas.”

“Ooh.” Max raised an eyebrow. “You’re not having a good day. You haven’t been this snippy with me since I moved in.”

“*Moved in* being a relative term.” Mike muttered.

Max let her voice drop. “Seriously, Mike. Is something going on?”

“Just... needed some fresh air.” Mike said.

“Is it about that fucking prophecy girl? I can go interrogate her if you-”

“It’s not her. Just... leave me alone for a bit.”

“You know I can’t do that.” Max said softly. “But, hey, why don’t we do something else? Want to get some food? I’ll treat.”

“You don’t have to-”

“Naw, it’s fine. Got a bit of extra cash and shit. We can split some fries or something.”

Mike stared at her for a second, and then smiled a little. “Sure.”

“Hey, Ellie!”

El turned around, grinning, as Will rushed up to her, running across the street.

“You know, my name is Jane.” she teased.

“Nobody’s around.” Will said.

“Someone could still over hear us.” El sighed. “That’s what Kali said.”

“Yeah, but she never *stops* calling you ‘Jane’.” Will sighed. “Where are you going?”

“The store. Hop’s at work and Kali’s in class so I’m getting us Eggos.”

“Uh-huh. Did they ask you to do that?”

“Does it matter?” El smirked. “Why are you out, Byers?”

“Just... taking a walk. You know?”

El nodded. “Wanna come with me? I can buy us a movie for next movie night.”

“You don’t have to-”

“What’s new out?” El considered. “I think there’s that new horror movie. Should scare Dustin pretty good.”

Will’s eyes brightened. “Oh, I’d like to see that!”

“It’ll be like *The Haunting*.” El said.

Will laughed. “And *Dracula* and *Blair Witch* and *Gremlins* and *The Mummy*—”

“I missed *that* one.” El laughed. “He was scared of *The Mummy*?”

“The Boris Karloff one, not the 90’s one.”

“I gotta see *that*.”

The two kids walked off, going towards the store, not realizing that they were on almost the opposite side of town from Max and Mike.

And from what was about to happen.

“Okay, but in all seriousness,” Max said, dumping ketchup onto the top of the fries again, “The musical did *not* do justice to the film.”

Mike nodded, laughing a little. “Okay, but the remake?”

“Oh, don’t fucking remind me.”

They laughed some more, and Mike glanced over Max’s shoulder at the rest of the diner. A TV was in the corner, a sports game playing across the screen, subtitles describing the actions of the players. More kids were sitting around the diner than adults, probably enjoying the last of their weekend. Thankfully, none of them seemed to give a shit about what Mike and Max were talking about, which was to be expected. The Party weren’t exactly the Popular Kids- the only one who was *close* to popular was Max, due to her joining the Basketball and Track teams, but she still got a lot of scrutiny for hanging out with the Nerd Squad.

“God, and don’t get me *started* on the remake of... are you okay?”

Mike blinked, turning back to Max. “Sorry. Tuned out. What’re we talking about?”

Max stared at him for a second, and then said, “How’s Nancy’s college? Is it fun, do you think?”

"She seems to like it." Mike muttered, his voice lowering.

Ah. So that might be the problem. Max leaned forwards a little, asking, "Is she okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"Holly?"

"Yeah. She's made some friends, spends a lot of time with them. Reminds me of us, kind of, except they're all... well, more normal."

Max stared a little more, her face falling, as she asked, "Is something up with your parents?"

Mike stayed silent.

"Fighting?" her voice lowered, too, much more sympathetic. She remembered the fighting, yeah. That was the worst part.

"Sometimes. When they think Holly and I are asleep. But..." Mike considered, staring up at the ceiling. "They've kinda never had the best... relationship."

"So that's not what pissing you off?"

Mike glanced down at the table. Max had a feeling he was still trying to figure out if he wanted to tell her.

"I guess... they always- *Mom* always- well, Mom mostly- I don't *know*..."

"Take your time, Wheeler." Max leaned back a little, trying to relax him. Make him feel a bit better.

"Well..." Mike groaned, sitting back. "They always say they love me. And I think they think they mean it. But I know what they say about... people like me, like us. They say it to my face. I pretend I agree with them to make life easier. If I say anything, it'll be thirty minutes of arguing. And so... they think they love me, and sometimes I think they do, too, but... I've known for years that it's conditional. Even if they don't get pissed at me for... what I am, they'll try to

change it. *Fix* it. And they won't stop."

He sighed. "They'll have to find out eventually. The way stuff goes for me, I can never keep secrets for long. My life's a ticking time bomb, and I don't know when it'll blow. That's somehow worse than not knowing the bomb's there, you know? If I was ignorant, I wouldn't know til it blew up that I was in any danger. But it's the *waiting*, knowing that eventually it's gotta go... And I'm not in a hurry to speed it up, you know? So I just... try to avoid home. Give me some time away. God, I'd like to get *away*."

He stared down at the table, and Max stared at him, and they were silent for a while, letting the sounds of the diner fill their ears.

Then, Max said, "That sucks."

"Yeah."

Max hesitated, and then said, "And I get wanting to get away. Get away from all your problems."

Mike sighed. "Of course you do. You literally ran from California to Indiana."

"Yeah, but I was also a dumb twelve-year-old." Max laughed. "You're gonna get through this, Mike. And, well, if you need a place to crash, I think Claudia would probably adopt you, too."

"Dustin's Mom hasn't adopted anyone yet." Mike snorted.

"She might as well." Max said. "I think she's honestly waiting for my Mom and Stepdad to die or disown me or something so she can legally make me Dustin's baby sister."

"Aren't you older than him?"

"...actually, I don't know. What's his birthday, again?"

Mike was about to answer, when he saw something on the screen behind them.

At some point, whoever was in charge of the TV had swapped it to a

News Station. And he could see, at the bottom of the screen, subtitles reading over what was being said.

The Unknown Powered Individual has headed towards the construction site. Stay away until Authorities can arrive.

Max turned around, spotting the screen, too. She paled, and then turned back, holding out her arm.

“Come on.” she whispered. “We can get there in five seconds.”

Paladin jumped, glancing back over the wall. They’d just transformed behind an abandoned building, and most people had left the area: construction on the new building was off for the day, which of course made the area a great target for someone who liked destroying things.

“I’ll go into the building, run around a bit, see if she’s there.” Zoomer said quickly. “You try to contact the others for backup.”

“Our phones were in our pockets,” Paladin said, slowly and in a very annoyed tone, “Which vanished when we transformed.”

“Use a payphone.” Zoomer rolled her eyes, and then she rushed away, becoming a blur.

Paladin glanced up at the building; it was maybe half-built, the structure already complete and parts of the wall intact. He could occasionally see Zoomer rushing inbetween rooms, stopping every now and again to squeeze through an area or open a door.

And then he saw a flash from behind the building.

And before he could even think, he took off running.

He saw something, he *knew* it. If there was anything he’d learned from four years of running around fighting crime, it was to not ignore things that he saw.

So he rushed around the building, and skidded to a stop upon seeing

that she was *there*.

The Shadow stared at him for a minute, and then backed up a little.

“No! No, don’t run!” Paladin yelled, moving forwards. “It’s okay, we just want to talk.”

“And I don’t.” the Shadow said. “Go away.”

“We can’t do that, you’re hurting people.” Paladin glanced back towards the building. Max would be out in a minute, he knew. Maybe even a few seconds, if he was lucky.

“People who deserve it.”

“You haven’t done anything to prove that!”

The girl looked at him, and then tried to run. Paladin instantly followed her, throwing out his hands. Before he could think, his strands of light had shot out, catching the Shadow by the legs and tripping her to the ground. As he ran forwards some more, she whipped around to face him, realizing that he was very quickly gaining ground.

She stared at him, a slight bit of horror growing into her eyes. And quietly, she said, “I’m so, so, sorry.”

She threw out her hands, and suddenly Paladin jumped back, screaming. His vision was suddenly filled with flames.

Flames.

Fire.

Burning.

He didn’t even notice as the Shadow rushed away; all he could do was drop to the ground, covering his head with his hands.

“*Mike!*”

Zoomer rushed in, dropping in front of him. She could vaguely see someone running away out of the corner of her eye, but her focus was on her friend. He was curled onto the ground, clearly in the middle of some kind of panic attack.

“Okay, breathe, Mike, calm down. Everything’s okay.”

“What happened to Mike?” Zoomer looked up to see Lucas and Dustin race up, running towards them.

“I... I don’t *know*.” she responded, and she glanced around. What could have set him off? She didn’t see any glass, she didn’t see anything shattered.

And, more importantly, she didn’t see any fire.

14. Mike is not having a Great Week

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mike is not having a Great Week

Mike glared up at everyone else. “I’m *fine*, really.”

They were back in the Castle. Mike had detransformed once he’d calmed down enough to, and then they’d gone back to their hideout. Lucas and Dustin and Max were giving him *those* looks again, those looks that said they were pitying him, that they thought he couldn’t handle it.

“What *happened*?” Lucas asked carefully.

“It doesn’t matter.”

The trap-floor activated, and Mike groaned, leaning back. “You called El and Will?”

There was a bit of a pause, and then Lucas said, “And Nancy.”

Mike stared at him, shocked, and then said, “Are you *fucking kidding me*?”

“Look, Mike-”

El and Will landed on the mattress, with the latter holding a grocery bag that looked to be full of Eggo boxes. El leapt up, running over, and asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!”

“Lucas said you had another panic attack.” Will said, also jumping up.

“I’m *fine*!”

The others glanced to each other for a second, all sharing the same thought: over the last few years, during the (admittedly rarer) times that he'd had a panic attack, he'd told them. He'd grown a lot less defensive about it since they'd started being vigilantes. But he seemed very... closed off now. As if something else had happened.

"Mike..." El said, slowly sitting on the chair next to him. "It's okay. We just want to know what happened."

"She set something on fire, and I flipped out. It's not a big deal."

Max started. "What?"

"I said," Mike turned to give her a glare, "She set some shit on fire and I flipped out."

"Mike," Max said carefully, eyeing him with a lot of worry, "There was no fire."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, if something was on fire, I would've seen it. Nothing even looked super burned." Max said. "I ran out soon as I heard you screaming."

Mike stared at her in horror, and then he jumped to his feet, yelling, "So, what? Are you saying I... imagined it?"

"No, no, it's just..."

The trap-floor activated again, and Mike groaned.

"That'll be Nancy." Dustin said.

"I don't want to fucking talk to her."

"It's a bit late for that." Will muttered.

Nancy landed on the mattress, screaming, "*Fuck!* I hate that floor!" She jumped up quickly, though, saying, "Mike, are you okay? Do you need anything?"

“Nancy, I’m fine, so you can go away.” Mike said.

Nancy glanced at the others, who all gave her confused looks. She turned back to Mike and said, “Okay, how about we go home and-”

“You guys don’t have to treat me like I’m a *fucking baby!*” Mike yelled, still whipping around.

“We’re not-”

“Yeah, you are! I had a panic attack and you all are acting like my head blew up!” Mike said. “Just talk to me like a normal person!”

“Alright, fine.” El surprised everyone by speaking up, staring her boyfriend down. “Alright, *fine*. What do you want to talk about?”

Mike stared at her, freezing over. “I... I don’t know.”

“About the Shadow?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your panic attack?”

“I don’t *know!*”

El took a deep breath, and said, “That’s okay. But I think you need to calm down.”

Mike bit his lip, glancing down at the ground, and then he said, “I think I want to be alone.”

“I can drive you home.” Nancy offered, very quiet.

“I don’t want to be home.”

Nancy paused, and then said, “I know a spot.”

Mike nodded, and went over to his sister. “See you guys later.” he mumbled, not looking any of them in the eye.

There was silence for several minutes, even after Nancy and Mike left.

Finally, El said, "He'll be okay, right?"

There was a pause, and then Lucas said, "We should get home."

Mike sat at the edge of the roof, staring up at the cloudy sky. The street buzzed below them, cars rushed to and fro without a care for the two siblings on the roof. "This is better," he said, kicking his feet a little. "You come here often?"

Nancy snorted. "Not since I moved, dipshit. But I sometimes snuck out here during high school."

"Where are we, again?"

"Old apartment building. It's mostly for business meetings now, but I know the Janitor. He gave me a key so long as I don't jump or push someone onto the street or smoke in the building." Nancy said, waving her hand. "I used to come up here to make out with Steve and Jonathan."

"TMI," Mike groaned, moving to cover his ears, as the two of them let out a short laugh.

"And," Nancy finally said, "Up here, I don't have to talk about anything I don't want to."

They were quiet a little longer, and then Mike said, "I swear it was real. I saw fire. I'm not crazy."

Nancy didn't respond for a minute, and then she said, "I believe you."

"You do?"

"Yeah," Nancy said. "And... and I'm sure your friends, do, too. They just want you to be okay."

"I know they do," Mike sighed. "They can just be... protective."

Nancy quieted a little, and then she said, "Well, you guys wouldn't let Will walk home alone for four years."

“That’s different.” Mike said. “And besides-”

“Will didn’t seem to think it was different.” Nancy interrupted. Mike froze, staring at her, and she added, “Jonathan told me. He felt like everyone was keeping him under lock and key for years.”

“I... I didn’t know.”

“I think,” Nancy said, “You guys need to talk more. You talk about your problems a lot more than most kids do, but not enough. Talking about your problems helps them go away, you know?”

Mike smiled a little. “What, they teach you that at College?”

“You figure it out for yourself.” Nancy said, staring off into the sky. “One of the joys of adulthood they forget to tell you about.”

“Fucking wonderful.” Mike said.

After a minute, Nancy said, “How often have you had panic attacks? If you want to tell me.”

“Used to be very rare.” Mike sighed. “But... in the last week or so...”

“Because of the Shadow?”

“Just been... thinking about the accident. Probably shouldn’t have been doing that.” Mike sighed.

Nancy paused, and then said, “Maybe... maybe you should- and don’t take this as babying, more like a suggestion-”

“Spit it out.”

“Maybe you should... sit it out.” Nancy said. “Even if this isn’t what’s causing the panic attacks, running around beating the shit outta people on a weekly basis has gotta be stressful. And if this girl can... summon fire or whatever...”

“I don’t think she can summon fire.” Mike said. “She can fly, maybe. Unless she’s got two powers, but that’s impossible, right?”

“Well,” Nancy said, “If I meet someone with two powers, I’ll let you know.”

Mike smirked, and then said, “I think Mom’ll want us home for dinner.”

Nancy smirked. “Yeah. Ready to go?”

He nodded.

On the drive back, however, Mike settled on an idea.

And he really, really, wished he hadn’t.

But slowly, he pulled out his phone, and sent El a text.

- *Hey, who do we know who hasn’t transformed?*

It took her almost three minutes to respond.

- *Hop, Joyce, Jonathan, Steve, and Kali. Why?*

Mike sighed, slowly placing his phone back in his pocket and slamming his head against the window.

Fuck.

15. Jonathan builds up his Weapons Supply

Notes for the Chapter:

- 1) I love all of you guys so much, your comments literally made my day omg
- 2) If you think THIS part is angsty, wait until you get to the end of Part II...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jonathan builds up his Weapons Supply

“Nice job, buddy.” Jonathan said, smiling down at the polaroid Will had just taken. “You’re good with pictures.”

After everyone else had filtered out of the hideout, Will had called Jonathan over, asking if he’d wanted to hang out. Jonathan happened to have his cameras with him, and Will had suggested they all take pictures of the weapons wall. “Just in case you get into trouble or anything.” he’d said. “You can summon a million weapons in a jiffy.”

“You think you’ll ever use this?” Will asked, holding up the second camera.

“Probably not. Still, it’s best to be prepared.” Jonathan said.

They smiled a bit to each other, and then Will said, “Bet you don’t have to use your powers a lot at NYU.”

Jonathan hesitantly shook his head. “Never used them that much to begin with, though. Sometimes I’ll take photos of my essays in case I lose them. That way I don’t have to rewrite.”

“Good plan.” Will nodded. “Wish I could do that.”

Jonathan gave him a quick look. “Will, you can have pretty much every elemental power in the world.”

Will laughed, before saying, "I'm the Avatar, you gotta deal with it!"

Jonathan laughed, too. "Hey, I've been meaning to ask a while, does Mom ever go out with you guys?"

"No. She and Hop still don't like the whole vigilante thing."

"Well, I mean, she can turn invisible. Maybe she is there."

"I sure hope not. I cuss up a storm on those missions."

"You? Swearing?" Jonathan joked. "Aren't you an innocent angel?"

"Go fuck yourself, Jonathan."

After another minute, Jonathan said, "I think we've got all the weapons photographed now. I'll just have to remember to carry these with me and hide them from adults."

"What'll you say if you get caught?"

Jonathan considered. "Research project on forms of combat."

"Yeah, that'll work." Will hesitated as Jonathan started packing up, staring between the walls, until he said, "Uh, Jonathan?"

"Yeah?"

"I think... I think Mike's having a hard time. With a lot of stuff. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to help."

Jonathan paused, glancing back at him, and then he said, "That really sucks. I... I think the best thing to do is to be there for him. Just see what he needs, you know?"

Will nodded.

"Well," Jonathan threw his bag over his shoulder, "We should get back home. Ready to go?"

"Can I drive?" Will asked, eyes bright. He'd just gotten his license, and he *loved* using it.

“Sure! Just don’t kill us all.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Hey! Steve!” Dustin yelled, rushing down the road.

Steve turned around, smiling a little, turning away from the houses.

“Hey, buddy! What’s going on?”

“I had a couple questions for you.” Dustin said, finally catching up and walking next to the older boy. “Mind answering for a bit?”

“Shoot.” Steve said.

“So, like, do you ever use your... gifts in College?”

Steve gave him a quick, panicked look, and Dustin said, “Come on, it’s an empty street. We can talk.”

Steve shook his head, before grabbing Dustin’s arm and dragging him inbetween two houses. After glancing into the windows briefly, he said, “How the *hell* have you not gotten caught yet?”

“We know when we can talk and when we can’t.”

“Apparently you *don’t*! We’re in the middle of the fucking street... God, what did you want to know again?”

Dustin groaned. “I wanted to know if you ever used your powers in College.”

Steve sighed. “Well, I barely used them during my High School Years, so I can’t imagine College bringing out the antigravity shit.”

“Really? You don’t use it?”

Steve paused. “Well, honestly, I sometimes use it to jump higher in Basketball, but not that often. Just when I think it’d be fun. But, no, I don’t use them so much.”

“Okay, just one more.”

“Whatever you say, kid.”

“While you were out, did you ever run into over vigilantes? Aside from us?”

Steve stopped for a minute, staring at him, and then he said, “Why?”

“Max and I- and everyone else, obviously- we were kinda... we were hoping that if there were other kids running around with powers, we could... help them. Also there’s kinda another vigilante running around who might have been in your general area a few years ago.”

Steve stared at him another second, and then said, “Well, the only powered kids I know of are you guys, and me and Jonathan and... that’s about it.”

Dustin looked a little upset. “Oh, uh, okay.”

“Was that a bad answer?”

“No, no, just... was kinda hoping you knew something.”

“Well, sorry, buddy.” Steve paused, and then said, “Hey, I’ll buy you ice cream if you don’t tell your Mom.”

“Nice!”

El opened the door, confusion spreading across her face. “Will?”

Will awkwardly waved at her. “Hey. Can we talk?”

She nodded, and Will walked into the foyer. He glanced around, noticing he could see a bit into the kitchen as he said quietly, “Hi, Hop. Hi, Kal.”

Hopper waved from the table, where he seemed to be going through some police files. Kali was looking over his shoulder, apparently looking at the information with him, but she glanced up and smiled, waving. “Hey, Will.”

“Do you need something, kid?” Hopper asked.

“Uh, just want to talk to El for a bit.”

The chief nodded at them, and Kali said, “If you need anything, we’re out here.”

El grabbed Will’s hand, dragging him up the stairs, as Will nodded at her. They went to her room, where she asked, “Is something wrong?”

“I... I kinda wanted to ask you that first.” Will said, moving to sit on her chair, as she flopped onto the bed.

“Is this about Mike? Because he told me he’s fine.” El said quietly.

“It’s about the Shadow girl.”

El sat up. “What?”

Will hesitated, and then he said, “I did some more research when I got home, and... and I didn’t manage to find who might be funding these buildings, but... I managed to map out all the buildings she’s hit, and it’s...” he sighed. “Damnit, I shouldn’t have...”

“No. I want to see.” El said, moving a little closer.

“It’s just... I wanted to show you first, because you might not want the others to see...”

“Why wouldn’t I want the others to see?”

Will bit his lip, and then reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a sheet of paper. As he unfolded it, he moved to the floor, laying it out. El dropped next to him. At first, she didn’t see the issue; it was just a map of a little bit of the US- Illinois to the Ocean- there was just a lot of red stickers where, she supposed, the destroyed buildings were located.

“There aren’t any below Kentucky, it’s just in this area.” Will said solemnly. “And... well, look where it’s mainly focused.”

Most of the stickers were around New York and Indiana. Quite a lot

around the Hawkins area.

“Well, she’s been here.” El said quietly, gesturing to the Indiana section. “That makes sense.”

“El...” Will sighed. “These... God, I should’ve done more color-coding, but... some of these are from a couple years ago.”

“What’s... what’s your point?”

“My point is... whatever this is, it’s been around Hawkins for longer than the last week.”

A sudden fear seized El, and she felt her stomach drop. “Will, *what* are you saying?”

“El, if this... if this started after the Lab shut down...”

He didn’t have to finish that statement, because El got it.

“It’s not connected to them.” El shook her head, standing up. “It can’t be.”

“El-”

“The investor of these buildings probably killed her parents or burned down her school or something, that’s why she’s doing this. She’s not going after *them*, because they’re gone. They’re gone and they’re not coming back.”

“*El!*” Will jumped up, wrapping up the map again. “*El!*”

El took several deep breaths, turning to stare out her window. He was wrong, he was wrong, he had to be *wrong* ...

“El, listen. It’s just a theory. Maybe I’m wrong, maybe it’s just a Midwestern organization...”

“Probably.” El said.

They stared at each other for a long while. And then El said, “We need more information.”

“I’ll do more research before telling the others.”

“You do that.”

They stared hard for another minute, and then Will said, “I should go.”

“Tell your Mom we said ‘hi.’”

“I’ll do that.”

Will left, heading down the halls, only to meet Kali at the top of the stairs. “Hey. We didn’t fight.” he said uselessly.

Kali was staring at him, her face unreadable as always. Finally, she said, “I thought I heard part of your conversation-”

Shit. “It was nothing. You shouldn’t be worried.”

Kali reached out, grabbing Will’s hand, making him jump. “Will,” she said softly, “I just want you to know, if it *is them*... you come to me.”

“What?”

“I know you were there. You, me and El... we were *there*. I’ll protect you. I need you to trust me on this, I *will* protect you.”

Will stared at her, fear creeping up in his chest, as she said, “We’re never going back there.”

16. Lucas gets to be the Cool Older Brother

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lucas gets to be the Cool Older Brother

“Hey, Erica!” Lucas said, knocking on her door. “Can we come in?”

“When you’re *dead*.” was the response.

“Max is here.”

There was a pause, and then Erica called, “*Fine*.”

Lucas opened the door, smiling a little at Max. He’d asked her her opinion on his new idea, and she’d given him the thumbs-up. He just hoped Erica would like it.

“What’s up?” his sister asked, looking up from her phone for a second.

“Well,” Max said, moving to sit beside the girl. “Lucas and I were talking about how your powers are getting better.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And,” Max could barely hide her smile, turning to look up at Lucas, “Your brother had an idea.”

“Oh, dang.” Erica muttered under her breath.

Lucas then asked, “How would... how would you like to see the Hideout?”

Erica instantly dropped her phone, leaping to her feet, her face lighting up. “Really?”

“Now, you still can’t go out fighting people for a few years,” Lucas said carefully, “But, we figured, should something *happen*, you should

know how to get to a safe place.”

“Holy *shit*, really?”

“Language.”

“Can I really go? Are you gonna show me how to get in? Can I take my friends-”

“We’ll tell you on the way.” Max said, jumping to her feet. “I’m driving. Ready to go?”

Erica rushed over, throwing her arms around her brother. “Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*”

Lucas laughed, hugging her back. “It’s no problem, Erica. Now, come on, let’s take the Queen to her Castle.”

“Princess.” Erica corrected, as they started to leave, “Mom’s the Queen.”

“Oh, that’s definitely true.”

“This is *it*?” Erica asked, looking around the shed, sorely disappointed. She’d heard about their secret hideout a while ago, and had been building it up in her own mind. Now, she was just standing in a very old and slightly dirty shed in the middle of the woods.

“Sort of.” Lucas said, moving to the wall and starting to tap out a pattern.

“It looks like a place someone gets murdered in.” Erica muttered, as Max started to giggle.

At that point, Lucas finished tapped, and the floor opened up. Erica screeched the whole way down as Lucas promptly started laughing hysterically. By the time they hit the mattress, Lucas and Max had both completely lost it, and Erica had her eyes shut tight. She started letting out more curse words, which didn’t help Max and Lucas calm down.

"You're okay, Erica." Lucas finally said, as he helped Max to her feet. "You can open your eyes now."

"No. You killed us, and we're in Hell, and I'm blaming you."

"Seriously, Erica, look around."

Erica finally opened her eyes, squinting a little, and then she jumped to her feet, gaping. "Holy *fuck*!"

"Seriously, Erica, Mom and Dad are gonna kill me if you keep cussing like that."

Erica seemed to be absolutely *fascinated*. She rushed towards the weapons wall first, saying, "Cool!" before running to the books, rushing across the shelves and scanning the book titles. She stopped, grabbed the VHS of *Heathers*, and asked, "What's this?"

"Put it down, you can't watch that." Lucas said.

"Does Mom know you have it?"

"No, and we had to steal it back from Will's Mom, so you're gonna keep your mouth shut."

Erica moved to the computer. "Can I use this?"

"Not without Dustin's permission."

"What about the weapons? I want all of them!"

"Yeah, no."

"What's that room for?"

"That," Lucas said, moving over and tapping the wall to reveal the door, "Is our practice room."

"What do you do in there?"

"Anything we want." Max said. "Will's blown up more times than you can count."

“What can I do?” Erica asked.

“Well,” Lucas asked, gesturing towards the door, “You know how me and Max can transform into-”

“Yes!” Erica cheered, rushing into the practice room. She skidded to a stop as the door shut, and she yelled, “Hey! You didn’t tell me it was cold in here!”

“Do you want to transform or not?”

“Why don’t we start,” Max suggested, smiling a little, “With a little warmup? Do something cool.”

“Right!” Erica said.

She shut her eyes, and held out her hands, focusing on the energy surrounding her. As she did, Max muttered to Lucas, “Uh, mind telling me what’s going to happen?”

Lucas gestured towards the glass, and they looked again, as Max suddenly noticed what looked like glitter surrounding her hands. No, not glitter... sparks.

In what seemed like an instant, sparks were storming around the practice room, swirling around her like a tornado, shining like orange sparkles. Erica twirled a little, letting her hair fall out of a ponytail. “This good?” she called.

“It’s perfect, actually!” Lucas yelled. “Now hold out your hands, try and get a lot of energy inbetween them.”

As Erica obeyed, Max asked, “So... sparks?”

“Sparks of energy. I summon energy blasts and can form energy into objects, she can summon energy into sparks. She lit the house on fire a couple of times.”

“Did she?”

Lucas nodded. “Yeah. She hasn’t got that great a control over it yet, though- okay, Erica, now bring your hands together! Try to hold the

energy!”

Erica obeyed, letting sparks shoot out from between her clenched palms.

“Just hold it there for a while. If it doesn’t work, start again!”

As Erica kept trying, Max heard a faint buzzing behind her. She turned, looking at her bag, and after glancing behind her a bit, she walked over, pulling out her phone and staring at the screen. Huh, she got an email. She thought she’d turned the email notifications off...

Wait.

Wait.

Max rushed to the corner of the room, saying something to Lucas like “Hold on a second”, and opened the app, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited. Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit, holy *shit* ...

Finally, it opened. She slid to the ground, staring ahead.

It was the Emergency Email. And she had a new message.

She didn’t recognize the email address, and if she had to guess, it was probably one that was brand new- if she was going to contact someone possibly dangerous, she’d probably make a new email for it.

Shaking a little, she opened it, staring in shock at the very brief message there.

Who are you?

Nothing else.

Max stared for another second, glancing towards Lucas, who was still trying to coach Erica, who was getting increasingly frustrated. Should she... no. This was really simple. She could do this.

She opened up a reply, typing out. *Friends. Powered friends. Look us up in Hawkins- they’re not too quiet about how much trouble we’re causing.*

She wondered how to sign it, so she quickly added -*Zoomer* and sent it.

She'd talk to Dustin about it later- he probably got the email, too.

But she did smile a little, thinking to herself, *Holy shit. We might have found someone.*

Erica eventually decided to stop, and Lucas talked to her for about ten straight minutes about how transforming could be difficult for different people. "You'll get it, though. You're super determined." he said.

"How long did it take you?" Erica asked.

"Well, I didn't get it very fast, I'll tell you that." Lucas said. "Also, if you want to practice transforming, you come here. First transformations can sometimes be dangerous. I almost blew up a bookshelf-"

"You're gonna have to teach me the code to get in." Erica said. "What was it? Morse Code?"

"Yeah. And if you *really* don't want to learn it-"

"I take it back. It looks *awesome*."

Max sat behind them, still a little distracted. "Hey, Max!" Erica called, and Lucas turned around, slightly concerned at her silence. "Wanna show me the weapons?"

"No-" Lucas said.

Max smirked, standing up. "Of course. Which one you want first?"

"*No!*"

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, I hope y'all enjoyed the last filler chapter for

this fic. Everything goes to shit after this...

17. El breaks into her sister's stuff

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

El breaks into her sister's stuff

Mike heard the tapping on his window, and he turned, a little surprised, to see El floating outside. He ran over, pulling the window open. "What's up?"

"Can we talk?" El asked, holding out her hand.

Mike hesitated, and then nodded, grabbing onto her, as she pulled him into the air and up to the roof. The stars were already out, flashing above their heads; there wasn't any moon, though, so it was a bit hard to see each other through the darkness.

Once they sat down, they both stared at each other, waiting for the other to start. After several minutes, Mike said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry." El replied.

"No, you didn't do anything wrong." Mike said, curling up. "I snapped at all of you cause I was scared."

"But you're right, we were babying you." El said.

"You didn't mean to."

"That doesn't matter." El said, scooting a little closer. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Mike bit his lip, before saying, "No."

"Okay."

There was silence for a bit longer, before Mike asked, "Is anything bothering you?"

El hesitated, before saying, “You’re gonna hate this.”

“Try me.”

“I’m worried about you.”

Mike stared up at the sky. He didn’t *hate* that, exactly, but it was never a nice thing to hear. “Yeah?”

“You’ve been on edge a lot.”

Mike paused, before saying, “Nancy suggested that I sit the whole ‘Mystery Girl’ thing out until she goes away or something. But I... I just *can’t* imagine not... still, maybe...”

He glanced over at El, and she somehow managed to pick up on the worried edge in his tone. “What?”

He sighed. “Well... you’re gonna hate this.”

“Shit.” El said quietly.

“If... if that fire wasn’t real...” Mike said slowly. “If... shit, I don’t know, let’s just...”

“Mike.” El reached out, grabbing his hand. “Tell me.”

Mike turned, looking *anywhere* but at her, and he said, “What if it’s Kali?”

There was a long pause, where every possible response to that question flashed through Mike’s head. He didn’t even want to look at her, didn’t want to see her reaction.

Finally, she said, “The Shadow’s been to a lot of other cities. Kali’s been at home.”

“But if she could make us think she flies or sets things on fire...”

“I don’t think she looks like her, but that could be the transformation magic.” El said. “And... wait, Kali has a gang of friends. I could see them helping her with this.”

"She does have quite a bit of the vigilante justice angle going on."

"Fuck." El said, curling up a bit more on the roof. "Fuck, fuck, fuck..."

"I didn't want to mention this cause I figured you'd be pissed," Mike explained quickly, "You'd tell me I was jumping to conclusions or that she's your sister and-"

"No." El shook her head. "No, listen, with what happened earlier..."

"What happened earlier?"

"It doesn't matter. Just... it's possible." El sighed, and then turned to Mike. "What should we *do*?"

Mike considered. "If you think her old Gang's in on it, is there a way she'd be able to contact them?"

El thought back, and suddenly remembered something. "I don't think she's been talking to her classmates on her phone." she said quietly.

"What?"

El shook her head. "I have a plan. But it'll involve potentially pissing off my sister."

"Well, anything we do is gonna piss her off if she's our Shadow."

"Alright. How would you feel about stopping by my place tomorrow morning?"

"For how long?"

"Eh..."

Mike considered. "I'll have to miss first period, but I think I can get away with it."

"Good."

At 8:00 sharp, El opened her door, smiling at Mike. “Mike!” she said brightly, “Come on in!”

She pulled him in by the arm, dragging him into the foyer. “Hey, Kal! Mike’s here!”

“Is your Dad home?” Mike asked under his breath.

El shook her head. “Had an early day. Hopefully Kali won’t remember that you have school.”

Kali peered in. “Mike? Don’t you have school?”

Fuck.

“Uh, we’ve got a delayed day. Buses were late. We start in an hour or two.”

“Hmm.”

“We’re just gonna go upstairs.” El said, smiling a bit. “I wanna show him how my online classes work.”

“I’ll be down here if you need me.”

“Great!”

The second they reached the top of the stairs, Mike said, “I’ll wait outside. You go in.”

“Kali says she’ll be downstairs, but she’s got a class soon, and if she didn’t bring her laptop down, she’ll try to get in her room.” El said quickly. “So think up on how to distract her while you’re here.”

“Got it.”

Instead of heading towards El’s room, the two teens stopped outside of Kali’s. El squeezed Mike’s hand quickly, and then ducked away, rushing into her sister’s room and shutting the door behind her.

She was going to get in *so much trouble* if Kali found her.

Kali’s room was a lot different than El’s- while Hopper hadn’t allowed

her to go full-Punk in her room, it was still decorated with much darker colors, filled with books that she wouldn't let El read and enhanced with a wall that Kali had painted over so she could practice her artwork. She'd found that painting tended to be a nice outlet for her emotions; at first, it had been a lot of angry paintings in red of monsters and horrible images that she must have thought up in nightmares. But recently, it had gotten a bit... calmer. She'd painted the ocean, and lots of butterflies. She really did love her butterflies.

El stood still for a second, scanning the room, before she walked to Kali's nightstand- thankfully, her phone was still there, charging. Kali never let it charge, really, only plugging it in when the battery percent was in the single digits. El carefully grabbed it, opening it and waiting until it asked for a passcode.

Shit. Shit shit shit she didn't know the passcode.

Well, she was a bit lucky. It was numbers, so she just had to guess some numbers, instead of finding a word of some kind. And, well, she could probably guess the numbers.

After a minute, she tried *0008*.

That wasn't it. Fuck. She only had two more tries, she thought- she didn't actually know, she hadn't ever hacked into a phone before. Maybe she should've asked Max. Max had hacked into everyone's phones at least twice since she'd moved to Hawkins. She probably could have gotten into Kali's.

El suddenly got a new idea, typing in *0011*.

No. No, still wrong. Maybe she was *really* wrong. Kali *hated* any connections to the Lab, maybe she wouldn't even use their assigned numbers...

Still, she took a deep breath, and decided to take one last chance.

0811.

The phone unlocked.

El sighed, before glancing towards the door. She doubted she had

long, so she had to move fast. She managed to find the phone app, opening it up and looking for recent calls. And as fast as she could, she pulled a sheet of paper and pencil out of her pocket, scribbling down the numbers. She wrote about as many as she dared, before putting the phone back and racing out the door. Mike turned to her, startled by the sudden noise, but after she nodded at him, the two of them almost ran to El's room, slamming the door and flopping onto her bed.

"You got it?" Mike asked.

El nodded, passing him the paper.

"Great." Mike said, as she passed him the note. "I'll tell you what we get at the end of the day."

"Good luck." she replied.

Mike finally managed to get the list to Dustin after school.

He'd stopped by his friend's apartment under the guise of "studying", and then he, Dustin and Max sat in Dustin's room as he started typing into his laptop.

"What's this for?" Dustin asked again.

"It's not important." Mike said.

"Seems pretty important." Max said, scanning the page of numbers again.

"Listen, if it comes to anything, I'll let you know." Mike said. "We just need you to tell me who these numbers belong to."

"That requires a lot of hacking, Mike." Dustin gave him a glare.

"So?"

"Only a minute."

And, indeed, in a few minutes, Dustin said, "Okay, well, I got something, but you're not gonna like it."

"Yeah?"

"Well," Dustin said carefully, "They're all burner numbers."

"What the hell is a burner number?" Max asked.

"Temporary numbers." Dustin said. "Anonymous numbers. Basically numbers that can't be traced to a single phone, or are from a disposable phone." After a second, he turned to Mike. "Why do you have a list of burner phones?"

Mike shook his head. "Again, not... not important. I'll be right back."

He had to step over three cats- Mews, Tews and Buttercup- in order to reach the bathroom. Once he did, he locked himself in and called El, reporting on his findings.

"So they're probably not classmates." El said.

"Who else would Kali be calling, if not her Gang?" Mike asked.

El hesitated, and then said, "Mike, if she's our Mystery Girl..."

Before she could finish that thought, Mike heard a pounding on the door. He jumped, and called, "What is it?"

"Wheeler, you need to get your *ass* out here!" Max yelled, and Mike was a little worried upon hearing a panicked tone in her voice.

"What is it?"

"Will just called. We need to get to the hideout *now*."

"What? Why?"

Max was clearly trying to keep her voice level, trying to keep from screaming. "It's the Lab, Mike! They're back."

Mike was silent for a second, completely in shock, and then he realized that El was still on the phone. "El?" he asked carefully. She

didn't respond for a moment, and Mike realized that she *must* have heard.

Once El processed what Max had said, she screamed.

18. The Gang decides to live Underground

Notes for the Chapter:

SO sorry this is late!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Gang decides to live Underground

Will had been walking home from school when he saw him.

He'd taken the long route, wanting to enjoy the walk. He'd rarely been allowed to walk home since the accident, and while he had fun riding home with Jonathan the last week, he missed the walks home that Joyce finally let him start taking last year. He could look at everyone passing by, take in the sights of the city, and, well, if he spotted a crime happening before Dustin's supercomputer did, that was just a bonus.

Still, he didn't expect anything bad to happen as he passed through the streets. Sure, the loud noises of the city were quite... distracting, but he could deal. It was enough to have the freedom to get home by himself.

He was walking home from school, taking enough time to look around the town. His Mom did have the strict "if you're an hour late home without warning I'm calling the police" rule, but he still had quite a bit of free time for now.

As he walked, scanning the crowds of people, Will caught sight of a man, sitting at a table by himself outside of a restaurant. His suit caught Will's attention first- did people eat *outside* in suits? If he was at a business lunch it would be inside, right? Then he focused on the man's face, and something clicked in his mind. Something was... off. Had he seen this man before?

He stopped moving, standing still. The guy looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't think of where he might have seen him before. He

didn't usually stop and stare at strangers, and he didn't look like anyone he would have seen at school. As the man started typing something onto his phone, Will focused harder. Wait... maybe if he had shorter hair... no, no. But...

And then it hit him, and Will felt all the air knocked out of him.

Slowly, very slowly, he raised his hand. If he thought hard, he could remember, four years ago, raising his hand in a similar manner, before sending up a wall of ice and rushing into the vents. And that man... holy shit, had he been *there*?

Before Will could even consider that he may be wrong, the man turned, and suddenly spotted him. Will dropped his hand, panic overtaking him and freezing him to the spot, and the two stared at each other.

And then the man picked up his phone again, and Will took off at a run.

He knows.

Will ducked into an alley, his breath coming in shallow gasps, as he started to shake. It took him several minutes to calm himself down enough to even grab his phone, but it took him forever to open the right app; his mind was shaking, and he was on the verge of tears. *He knows. He knows and he saw me, and the Lab is here .*

He finally managed to call a number, and he held his phone to his ear, slowly crawling behind a dumpster. He didn't want to be easily spotted, or heard.

"Will?" he almost cried with relief when he heard his Mom's voice. "Hi! Are you alright?"

No. "M-Mom..." Will's voice was shaking. What could he even say?

"Will?" her voice was rising, too, upon hearing his fear. "Will, is something wrong?"

Yes. Yes, yes, yes, *something's wrong*. "Mom, they're here." he choked out. "The... the Lab. I saw him."

"Honey," Joyce said, and Will hated how worried she sounded, "Honey, are you sure?"

"One of the guys, the guy who was there when I..." Will was crying now. "He saw me. He saw me and I think he knew who I was. He knew who I was and he's *here*."

"Okay, okay." Joyce said quickly. "Honey, where are you?"

I don't know! "The city?"

"Okay. Stay where you are. I'll find you. Can you call your friends?"

He didn't know if he could even finish this call. "Yes."

"Okay. Jonathan and I are on the way. I can try to track your phone, and the bad men probably can't, but if they find you, do what you have to."

"I... I know."

"I'll be right there. Tell your friends to get to the Castle. Bring anyone who might in trouble."

"Mom...?"

"Yeah?"

Will took another deep breath, trying to calm himself, trying to slow the tears. "I... I love you. I love you so much."

"Will, baby, I love you, too. Nothing's going to happen to you. I'm going to find you."

"Okay."

"I'll be right there. Get your friends safe. Bye."

"B-bye."

As soon as he hung up, Will let out a low wail and buried his head in his lap. He'd thought this whole mess was over, he'd thought that he'd be okay...

After only a second, he picked up his phone again, moving to Lucas's contact. He sat there, waiting until he picked up. He'd have to call everyone, make sure they could get out, get hidden.

It took Joyce only ten minutes to reach Will. By that point, he'd managed to call Lucas and Dustin- the latter of whom told him that Mike was with them, and they could call El. Will tried calling Kali, but she hadn't answered. He was trying again when he saw his Mom's car pull up beside the alley. Slowly, he crawled out, peering quickly to make sure his Mom was actually driving, and once he saw her and Jonathan, he jumped to his feet and ran over, almost tripping over his own feet in his rush to reach the car. He almost leapt into the backseat, shutting the door. Jonathan and Joyce instantly whipped around, and Jonathan said, "Are you okay?"

Will nodded, a small sense of relief spreading through him.

"We're going to drive to the park, leave the car, and walk to the Castle." Joyce said, as she hit the gas again, driving them away, "We don't want to risk anyone following the car. Jonathan, you called Steve and Nancy?"

"Yeah." Jonathan nodded. "Nancy's stuck with her Mom and Holly but she's trying to get out as fast as she can. Steve's on his way. Will, do your friends know?"

Will nodded again. He didn't know if he could speak right now.

"We should be at the Castle in less than twenty minutes." Joyce said. "I let Hopper know, he's making sure his kids get there, too. We'll figure out a plan from there."

As Joyce started talking some more, Will curled up in his seat, staring out the window. And, finally, he started to cry.

Mike paced the floor of Castle Byers. "She should've been here by

now.”

They’d all gathered in the Castle, waiting for everyone so they could have an emergency meeting, and possibly an emergency evacuation. Joyce apparently had non-perishable food gathered in the car in case they had to hide out, which she and Jonathan had transported down with them before Dustin, Max and Mike had shown up. Will was curled in the corner with his brother, staring ahead at the wall in a worrying way. Lucas had come in just after Mike himself had arrived, dragging Erica with him, and they were both in the corner, trying to call their parents at work. Max was with them, sitting and worriedly playing with her hair.

“Mike, you need to chill out.” Dustin said from the table, where he was sitting.

“The *Lab* is back,” Mike said, “And El is *still out there*, and you want me to *chill out*?”

“Dustin’s right,” Joyce said from the bookshelf, which she was reshelving. “Worrying won’t solve anything. El’s with Hopper and Kali, and the three of them could take on the world if they had to.”

“But the Lab *knows* what they can do.” Mike said, sitting in a chair and burying his head in his hands. “They *know* how to stop them! What if... what if El’s Dad survived the building collapse and he comes after them? We never saw a body-”

“If Brenner is alive, I will personally beat the shit out of him.” Joyce assured him. “If El doesn’t get to him first. Have you tried calling Nancy?”

“She texted me.” Mike said softly. “Said she’s trying to get away from Mom. But Nancy’s not powered.”

“The Lab still kinda hates her, though.” Dustin said. “For blowing up their-”

“Dustin, you’re not helping anything.” Lucas called from the corner.

“Lucas, should I get my friends here?” Erica asked, after her call went to voicemail once again.

"They should be fine, unless any of their relatives are superheroes." Lucas said. "Or unless they've been showing off. You, however, are my little sister, and thus, if they should somehow figure out who *I* am..."

"Okay, okay..." Erica groaned. "How long do we have to stay down here?"

"It depends on how long it takes before we figure out what the Lab is up to." Joyce explained. "I have enough food here for about a month, though, and if we have to hide longer, I'd suggest going on the run."

"Jesus, Ms. Byers, you're prepared." Max said.

"Well, I've had four years to think about this." Joyce said. "As well as all my years of teenage superhero paranoia. Hopper will be bringing the emergency batteries and part of the water supply."

Finally, they heard a rumble above them. "What is *that*?" Erica said, as Mike leapt to his feet.

"The Trap-Floor." Lucas explained quickly. "It means El's here."

"Or someone else." Max said cautiously, also standing up, looking prepared to run if someone dangerous fell down.

Thankfully, though, El landed on the mattress first, rolling off to make way for Hopper, who managed to land on his feet. Mike instantly ran over, throwing his arms around his girlfriend and hugging her as close to him as possible. She gripped onto him, too, and she looked like she'd recently been crying.

"Where's Kali?" Will asked in a shaking voice, slowly standing up.

"She hasn't called back yet." Hopper said, before tossing a box to Joyce. "That's why we were late- we checked out the animal shelter she volunteers at, they said she didn't check in today."

"You don't think...?" Max said, as Will let out a small squeak and grabbed onto Jonathan's hand.

"Steve should be here in a few minutes." Jonathan said. "Maybe he's

seen her.”

“Do they hang out?” Dustin asked.

“Uh...”

“What if she...?” Lucas began.

“I’m going back out for her.” Hopper said, moving back towards the trap-floor.

“I want to come.” El said, pulling away from Mike slightly.

Hopper shook his head. “We talked about this. If they’re after anyone, they’re after you two and Will. You need to stay here, where it’s safe.”

“She’s my *sister* .”

“And she’d want you to stay far away from them.” Hopper said, before turning to Joyce. “Can you try and hack into their servers?”

“Well, I’m not as good at computers as... but, well, I know enough.” Joyce said, before rushing over to turn the supercomputer on. Dustin jumped up to follow her.

“I’ll be back with Kali.” Hopper said, before turning to glare at El. “*Stay here* .”

After he disappeared, El went back to hugging Mike. This time, though, it was so nobody could tell that she was whispering to him.

“Do you think she went out?”

“She might be why they’re here.” Mike said quietly. “If she’s blowing things up, they’re bound to notice.”

“We need to go after her.”

“Everyone will notice.”

“So we need an excuse.”

“What’ve you got?”

“Nancy’s still out there.”

“Wait a minute, and then use that.”

They pulled away, as Lucas let out a groan. “They’re still not picking up! What if they’re in trouble?”

“Mom and Dad have managed to hide their powers for, like, decades.” Erica sighed. “They’re safer than we are, too, cause their powers aren’t super obvious.”

Mike pretended to pull out his phone, and then he said, “Ms. Byers, Nancy just called. She got lost, I’m gonna go pick her up.”

“I’ll come, too.” El said quickly.

Joyce turned around, shaking her head. “No, we’re all staying here.”

“Ms. Byers, we can handle it. It’s just a stroll in the woods.” Mike said, feeling very bad about lying to her.

“Text us every five minutes.” Lucas said, before Joyce could respond. “And if you get into danger, the signal is Code Red.”

They both nodded.

Joyce paused, before saying, “If you’re not back in an hour, I’m calling Hopper and telling him it’s not my fault before we all go to get you.”

“Make it two hours. Woods are pretty big.” Mike said.

“Hour and a half.”

“Deal.”

And so El and Mike jumped into the tunnel, feeling themselves sucked back up into the Cabin. Once the trap-floor flipped back over, allowing them to sit on it, El said, “Shadow was spotted. In town.”

“Then let’s go.” Mike said.

As soon as they left, Max got an alert on her phone, too.

Once she saw what she was, she quietly excused herself and rushed to the bathroom, too. It was from the Secret Email, and it was an attached file, from the same person who'd contacted them earlier. She opened it, seeing a video.

And the second she clicked "play", she screamed.

She rushed out of the bathroom, saying, "Hey! Lucas! Dustin! Will!"

They glanced over. "What?" Lucas asked.

"I... I need your help with something." Max said. "*Now.*"

And she pulled them into the bathroom, struggling to crowd them all in. "I got an email, from some kid who needs help- I thought. I mean, I *think*. I don't know what I mean!"

"You got an email?" Lucas asked.

Max nodded. "And he sent a video. But... *look!*"

As they stared, Dustin said, "Holy shit."

19. Mike and El make all the wrong decisions

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mike and El make all the wrong decisions

“I got it.” El said.

Mike dropped the forcefield and then sat next to her. They’d found that his forcefields did tend to have minor sensory deprivation, and combined with a blindfold, could significantly amplify El’s tracking powers.

“You found Kali?”

El nodded. “She hasn’t transformed yet, but I can find her.”

“So, let’s go!” Mike said, but El paused. “What?”

“Should we go for Nancy? She could get hurt.”

Mike hesitated. “But the Mystery Girl could hurt other people.”

They stared for a second, knowing the answer but not wanting to say it. Finally, El said, “You get Nancy. Then I’ll find you.”

“What if she fights you?”

“If I tell her the Lab’s after her, she should come with.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“I’ll call you for backup.” El said, waving her phone a little.

They stared for a second, and then Mike hugged her. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

And after that, they split up.

And they would regret splitting up for a long time.

El looked up at the abandoned building. It was in a smaller part of town, a part she'd never walked to. She briefly glanced at the dusty sign on the door before walking inside, judging from the creaking and the darkness that nobody had any use for the building for years before Kali showed up.

And, *God*, she was going to have some *words* for her sister.

She walked in, noticing that a few lights were flickering. Probably because someone was inside, unless Kali had moved since the last time El checked. Which she might have.

However, once El heard voices, she stopped.

Because that wasn't Kali's voice.

She took off at a run, and threw open the nearest door. Two people turned around, stunned at her presence- a tall man and a nervous-looking woman. They didn't look like Lab workers, but, who knew?

"What in the hell are you doing here?" the man asked, slightly threatening.

El stared between them, her eyes narrowing, before she asked, "Where's Kali?"

They stared in shock for a second, and then the woman said, "How do you know-"

"What do you know about her?" the man stepped closer, still looking angry.

"Where is she?" El repeated.

"She got the hell out of here." the man said. "And good thing, too, because I don't know what you want with her."

"Where'd she go?"

“That’s none of your business!”

“*Where is she?*”

The man suddenly ran at her, reaching into his pocket, probably for a weapon. Without thinking, El threw out her hands and screamed, and the man flew and hit the wall.

Mike raced towards his house, after throwing his hood over his head. He didn’t want to get recognized in the street, because a friendly person might stop him to ask what he was doing, and an unfriendly person might stop him for... well, much worse reasons.

He kept looking everywhere, looking for a person who might be paying too much attention to him, looking for someone he may recognize from those brief few hours four years ago. Looking for *anyone* who could hurt his friends.

So he was the only one on the street who managed to see a girl dressed in all black turn a bend and duck down a street.

He froze for only an instant, a thousand thoughts circling through his mind all at once. *She’s supposed to be with El! If she’s here, where’s El? Is El hurt? Did she move before El could look for her again?*

And then he took off running after her.

He chased her down several dark streets, having to focus intently to make sure he didn’t lose sight of her in the shadows. If El hadn’t caught up with her yet, he would. Nancy could wait for now; she could take care of herself.

He wasn’t surprised to see that the Shadow ducked into the last building he’d seen her in; the building under construction was still abandoned for now. And if she had been exploring it earlier, she was probably planning to destroy it now.

Mike rushed in, seeing the girl in black rush up a half-built staircase, skipping broken boards and rushing up to the next floor. He followed, slowing down slightly so he could try and quiet his steps. By the time

he reached the floor, the girl was standing against the wall, running her hands against some broken boards. Mike wondered if she'd broken them, or if something else had. Well, it didn't matter.

"Stop." Mike said, and the girl whipped around, a quick splash of surprise in her eyes.

They stared for a minute, and then the girl said, with a surprisingly scared tone, "You shouldn't be here."

"You shouldn't either." Mike said. "There are bad people here, if you want to be safe, you should go with us."

"I can't."

"Why *not*?"

"I have to destroy this place."

"No, you don't!"

"You don't understand-"

"Then tell me!"

The girl paused, before saying, "The people who made this are bad. And you don't need to know anything else, you just need to stay safe and trust me."

"Trust you?" Mike snorted. "You gave me a fucking panic attack! You blew up a store with people inside!"

"I do what I have to do!"

"No," Mike shook his head, "You could have asked us for help."

"You couldn't have helped!" the girl looked frustrated, angry. "And if you're not going to help now, you can leave me alone!"

Mike glared at her for a minute, and then threw out his hands, letting strands of light shoot out and throw her against the wall. She rolled, whipping around, and said, "Oh, you did *not* want to do that."

He shook his head, and ran at her. A wall of flame burst up beside him, but he wasn't getting fooled by that again. So he threw himself at the girl, and she ducked out of the way only to knock him to the ground. He leapt up, shooting out his light beams, and prepared for the fight.

"What the *fuck!*" the woman said, rushing towards the man. El cocked her head, and the woman was thrown away. El held out her hand, lifting the man into the air and holding him against the wall.

"Where's *Kali?*" she asked again.

Suddenly, she felt herself grabbed from behind. She screamed as she was lifted into the air, dropping the man so that she could push herself free. Another woman screamed behind her as her arms were ripped away from El's stomach, and El whipped around to see her back up. She held out her hands, throwing everyone away from her again, and then she took off running. Her leg was grabbed as she passed the second woman, and she fell to the floor. She whipped around, pushing her into the air with her powers, before scrambling to her feet, about to turn around and run.

"Jane, *stop!*"

She froze, turning.

"Kal, we told you to go!" the man yelled behind her, and El stared as Kali approached.

"Shut up, Axel." Kali said, before continuing, "Jane, what are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" El asked, glaring. "Who are these people?"

Kali sighed. "Jane, this is my Gang. Axel, Mick, Dottie. Funshine's in the van. Guys, this is my sister."

They all stared for a second, before Mick said, "Fuckin' hell, Kal, why aren't you with Funshine? He was gonna take you to your hideout."

"I heard fighting." Kali shrugged. "I figured Jane and Hop could take care of themselves for a while."

"You got our messages?" El asked carefully.

Kali nodded. "Pretty late. Wifi here *sucks* . But I needed to make sure that my friends were okay."

"Are they?"

Kali said, "Yes. They've been here the last few months. I've been providing them with food, and they've been keeping me updated on what they've been up to."

"What have they been up to?" El asked.

"Hurting the people who've hurt them." Kali replied simply.

"Like in the Convenience store?"

To her shock, Kali glanced down at her in confusion. "Convenience store?"

El froze. "The... the store. And the arcade?"

Kali glanced to her Gang, who shrugged. "Jane, we didn't do that."

"But... your transformation..."

Kali blinked at her, and then held out her hands. A dark cloud formed inbetween them, filtering in and out of her fingers. Then, once she clapped them together, energy struck, and suddenly, Kali looked much different.

She was in a dark purple-and-black suit, with a dark jacket and tall boots, her hair pushed to the side and streaked in all shades of violet. Her mask covered almost all of her face, shimmering inbetween her two colors.

"Have you seen this?" Kali asked carefully, as El stared in horror. "I wanted to surprise you, but after I got the Gang safe, I've been using this disguise to sneak through town-"

“ *Kal* ,” El said, shock seeping into her words, “If you’re not...”

“Not what?” Kali asked, as El slowly turned to stare towards the windows.

If Kali wasn’t the Shadow...

The Shadow was knocked back by some more strands, as Mike ducked behind a pole. He should have transformed, he knew it, but he didn’t have the time. She was sending more flames, more flames that weren’t real, that *couldn’t* be real.

None of this is real.

He leapt out, startling her, as he knocked her back with more strands, before surrounding himself in a field and rushing forwards, taking the light barrier with him. He dropped it once he reached her, and she glanced down at him before she turned, heading for the window. He reached out to grab her, but she moved to fast, and he lost his balance and fell right in front of some fire.

And, in a flash, he realized that it was hot.

Kali’s illusions couldn’t manifest heat.

This fire was *real*.

He screamed, and the girl turned around, terror in her face. He managed to gain enough control to summon some light strands to knock her off her feet, and she fell to the ground, landing with a thump. Before he even knew what he was doing, Mike rushed forwards and grabbed her mask, ripping it off.

He froze, and he stared.

And then Nancy leapt up and kicked him, sending him flying across the room.

20. Nancy makes Bad Life Choices™

Notes for the Chapter:

IMPORTANT NOTES

- Omg thank you so much for your comments!! Honestly seeing everyone's reactions to the last chapter was the best thing that's happened to me all week.
- Fun fact: The Nancy/Mike confrontation was actually the first scene I came up with for this AU, and I kinda built the plot around that, lol. :D
- Okay, not the important thing: unfortunately, I'm going to have to up the warnings for this chapter: it gets pretty damn violent towards the end. I guess that's what happens when you're fighting people who don't see you as human...

Thank you for the comments, love you! :D

CHAPTER TWENTY

Nancy makes Bad Life Choices™

“Nancy, what the *fuck*?”

Nancy jumped, realizing that her mask was off. She quickly placed it back, but the damage was done. Mike stared at her in complete and utter shock, and suddenly, all that fire felt too real and not real at all at the same moment.

“Mike, you need to leave.” she said, struggling to keep her voice level.

“You have *powers*?” he shouted. “You have powers and you didn’t think to *tell anyone*?”

“Mike, this isn’t important-”

"You've been blowing things up!" Mike screamed, scrambling to his feet. "You set a building on fire! You *gave me a panic attack!*"

"That was an accident." Nancy said quietly. "I just wanted to scare you, I didn't think-"

"What? You didn't think I'd be scared of fire?" Mike asked, his voice rising. "I was *burned alive*, Nancy!"

"I know." Nancy said, and Mike subconsciously noticed the flames around them start to slowly lower in volume- which was good, because the floor was starting to creak under the breaking boards. "I know, and it's my fault and I'm *sorry*."

"Why couldn't you tell us?" Mike asked, his voice breaking. "Why couldn't you tell *me* ? I'm your brother! I was there in the accident! And you *knew* I had powers!"

"It wasn't safe."

"Wasn't *safe*?"

"I was going after them. You would've wanted to come."

"Going after *who*?"

Nancy finally snapped, her voice rising in anger as the flames grew and she stepped forwards, closer to him. "The *Lab*, Mike! I'm fighting the *fucking Lab!*"

There was a tense silence before she dared to continue. "They never got shut down, they just moved out of town because we got wind of what they were doing. They're still everywhere, all across the country. We've found their hidden fronts, buildings with paperwork stashed away and money getting filtered into their activities, and we've destroyed them. We found they had all these places in Hawkins, and so we came back for break to rip them apart."

"*You've* been destroying-"

Nancy nodded. "Burning the shit out of them."

She held out her hand, and flames flickered between her fingers. That was when Mike noticed, the second she started controlling the flames, her suit started lighting up spirals of red. Almost *glowing*. Two colors after all.

“I was terrified.” she said quietly. “For the first few weeks after what had happened, I could barely *try* to use my powers. Because fire had hurt us. It hurt us so bad. But it’s beautiful, too. It’s warm, it’s kind, it’s *cleansing*. It destroys all the evil around us.”

“Nancy,” Mike said, and he was shaking now, his voice trembling. This couldn’t be real, this had to be a fucked up dream, he couldn’t be *hearing this*. “Nancy, this isn’t right. You can’t just *destroy* buildings. You can’t just kill people!”

“These people have done nothing but harm us, and people *like* us!” Nancy screamed. “Do you think any of them care about people with powers? They’re scared of us, they want to use us and control us if they don’t want to *kill* us!”

Mike shook his head, and shot out another burst of light, hoping to hold her in place, maybe drag her somewhere calmer, but instead she threw up her hands, and flames blocked off his beams, causing them to burst. Fire hit the ground by Mike’s feet, and he backed up, letting out a scream. He felt himself wobble, and he froze. He was right in front of the staircase, about to fall.

“Nancy, *please*,” he pleaded, “Stop it! *Stop it!*”

“Listen to *me*.” Nancy yelled. “This building’s gonna be their new front. I’m getting rid of it before it can be.”

“*Stop it!*”

“These are *my* powers, and I’m going to use them.” Nancy said. “I’m going to use them to *protect* people like us.”

Mike suddenly screamed, his words tumbling out without thinking. “You *can’t* have powers!”

Nancy froze, and the fire in front of Mike lowered enough that he felt brave enough to step forwards a little.

“What?” she asked.

“You can’t have powers.” he said, shaking. “You were too far away from the blast. That’s why I got affected and you...”

She stared at him, and her expression changed from confusion to horror. “Mike,” she said, in the strangest voice she had used all day, “What are you *talking* about?”

“You were on the staircase.” he repeated, starting to get confused himself. “So the glass and energy didn’t hit you.”

Nancy shook her head. “Mike,” she said, and he jumped upon realizing that she sounded *heartbroken* as well as bewildered, “I shielded you from the blast.”

His world was crashing in on him. “What?”

“You got too close.” she said, her words almost on autopilot as she scanned his face for some recognition of the memory. “You got too close to the glass and when it blew, I was right behind you. I grabbed you and turned you and I got hit with the fire. It’s my fault you got burned because as soon as I got my powers, I burned you. I burned you and...”

Mike stared at her. “No,” he said, shaking his head, “No, I touched the glass. That’s why it exploded. I touched the glass.”

Nancy shook her head. “Mike, no. I grabbed you. I grabbed... don’t you remember?”

“You were farther away.” Mike said softly. “You were farther away and that’s why you could get out and get help. I touched the glass and that’s why I got hit with the shards. You didn’t get any.”

“I-” Nancy froze, staring at him. He knew she must be realizing that she hadn’t gotten hit by any of the shards, but she still said, “No. No, I grabbed you. I remember. Because you screamed and I could *never* forget that...”

“Nancy,” Mike asked carefully, “Why do we remember the accident differently?”

They stared in horror, and suddenly nothing seemed to matter anymore, nothing but this inconsistency. Not that she was the Shadow, not that they were burning a building around them, not that the Lab was back in town.

Which was a bit unfortunate. If they'd remembered what was going on, they might have been prepared for what happened next.

Nancy screamed, and suddenly Mike felt hands clamp around his mouth. He was grabbed and dragged back, and Nancy suddenly... changed. Her eyes lit up with a golden hue, and flames suddenly burst from her hands. "*Get away from him!*" she screamed, rushing forwards.

But whoever had grabbed Mike simply turned and threw him down the stairs, and Mike could only scream as he dropped, falling for what felt like forever until he hit something- was it a step? A railing? Had he missed the stairs entirely and landed on the floor below? He didn't know, his head was spinning, and he was starting to smell the smoke, and suddenly someone had grabbed him, hoisting him to his feet. Something pricked on his arm, and his vision blurred.

And then he realized what was going on.

"*No!*" he screeched, and he immediately closed in on himself, curling up and preparing for his best defense strategy. He held for only a moment before bursting out, throwing out his limbs and screaming, and his forcefield shot out from his body, knocking everybody away from him. He managed to get a good glimpse of men in all-too-familiar suits being thrown away, and then he turned, trying to run. But he stopped as a floorboard broke from the ceiling, landing in front of him, still aflame. He screamed, falling back, his mind suddenly forcing him into a panic. He whipped around, looking for a way out, his vision blurring around him, only to feel more hands on his arms.

He could hear Nancy still screaming upstairs, and out of the corner of his eye, he could see men rushing up the stairs to meet her. "Nancy!" he yelled, trying to knock the men away. But he'd used so much of his energy with his powers, he was starting to tire himself out, he *should have transformed earlier...*

“Let me go!” he screamed at the men, as they tried to drag him again. He managed to kick one in a sensitive enough area that his grip loosened, and he broke away, whipping around and sending out a wave of light. “Get away from me!”

He could see them more clearly now, and he knew exactly who they were. They must have seen the flames, or heard the yelling, and known that powered children were here. He should have run. But he had to get to Nancy, and then they had to get away.

More people were racing towards him, and he summoned a forcefield around him, blocking them out. “Get away!” he screamed, and he started running.

However, the second his foot hit the ground, he felt very, very dizzy.

The field dropped as Mike doubled over, grabbing onto his stomach, which suddenly felt very light. And before he could recover himself, someone ran behind him, grabbing his arms. He felt a sharp pain, and he screamed as he was slapped, and dragged towards the door, and he couldn’t *stop it*. He tried summoning another forcefield, tried curling up and bursting out, but it didn’t come. He felt too tired. *Too tired*. Why was he so *tired*?

Suddenly, he remembered the pain in his arm, from right after he’d landed.

Those bastards drugged me.

He tried moving again, barely managing to break someone’s grip, but he was dragged back and thrown to the floor before he could even try to run. He felt a pain in his stomach- was it a sudden ache, or had someone kicked him?- and he doubled over again, preparing to throw up. Someone lifted him again, and he screamed, and he might have been crying- he *was* crying, sobbing. “Let me go!” he said, with what little voice he had left. “Let *me go!*”

He couldn’t hear Nancy screaming anymore, but that wasn’t her fault. He couldn’t hear much of anything anymore, except small bursts. He was starting to lose feeling in his legs, but even more worryingly, he was starting to feel *exhausted*.

They were dragging him out now, and he kept yelling- or maybe just thinking? He couldn't even hear himself. "Let me go! You bastards! Get away from me!"

Was this real? Maybe this was still a dream. He was starting to see in blurs anyway. He started to feel detached. Maybe this wasn't happening to him. Maybe he wasn't dying, or burning, or screaming, or sobbing.

Maybe he was just...

And then Mike Wheeler fell unconscious.

"Are you sure he's this way?" Kali asked. El had transformed, too, and had tracked Mike as fast as she could. He'd seemed scared when she saw him, yelling something at Nancy she had trouble making out. But now they were heading towards that direction, with El flying and leaping from rooftop-to-rooftop, dragging Kali along with her, and she could get him back to the Castle, and everything would be alright. They could deal with the Shadow later, they just needed to get somewhere *safe*...

However, once they reached the construction site, they could only stop in their tracks.

It was all on fire.

"She got here first." Kali whispered, wide-eyed.

"*Mike!*" El screamed, and while Kali yelled behind her, she rushed forwards towards the building, not noticing the tire tracks beside her.

She managed to reach the opening before Kali grabbed her arm, dragging her to a stop. "You can't go in there!" she yelled.

"Mike!" El could only say, turning back to her sister with tears in her eyes. "Mike is in *there!*"

"Then I'll go." Kali said, dragging El back just a little farther. "I have more experience with this than you do. The gang and I set places on

fire before. I'll be back soon."

She gave El a quick hug, and then rushed in.

El stared after her, and then burst into terrified sobs, dropping to the ground and curling up, burying her head in her lap. She stayed there for God knew how long, still crying and shaking and terrified that someone was going to *die*.

After what felt like years, Kali rushed out of the building, carrying someone in her arms. El leapt up, shaking, only to drop her jaw in shock.

Kali was carrying Nancy.

"What happened?" El asked, looking down. Nancy seemed to be unconscious, and Kali looked tired.

"I don't know," she responded. "I don't know, but she was the only one there, I swear. Mike wasn't there."

El stared in horror. "Then *where*—"

Before she could respond, they heard a loud car beep behind them. They whipped around, their hearts rising when they saw Hopper's car.

"Dad!" El yelled, rushing forwards towards the car.

"What are you—" Hopper began, though he stopped quickly at the scene in front of him.

"Dad, *please*," El said, tears coming to her eyes, "Get us to the Castle. I can find Mike there."

"Mike's gone?"

"Nancy needs medical attention." Kali said, her voice sounding tired. "Somehow she's not burned, but she's got some severe bruising. I think she got into a fight."

Hopper glanced between the three girls, and then he said, "Get in."

They drove away, and as El sat in the front seat, the weight of everything crashed in on her, and she kept sobbing.

21. Absolutely Nobody is Calm Right Now

Notes for the Chapter:

Before this chapter, I would like to add a pre-emptive: I WARNED YOU THIS WAS COMING

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Absolutely Nobody is Calm Right Now

“What *happened?*” Joyce asked, horrified.

She was applying some of the medicine to Nancy’s wounds, as Steve and Jonathan sat next to her, trying their best to help. Dustin, Lucas, Will and Max were all sitting against the glass, glancing over their shoulders towards El, who had blindfolded herself and was sitting inside the practice room. Kali was sitting by Nancy, too, but she was rapidly texting someone to apparently explain the situation. Erica was sitting in the corner, staring ahead at everyone else.

“They said they were going to get Nancy.” Joyce said quickly, as Hopper looked up from his own phone; he’d been trying to call someone who might help. “They said they’d only be in the woods, what the *hell-*”

“Jane came to get me.” Kali said quietly, finally pocketing her phone. “And Mike went for Nancy.”

“Where’s Mike?” Lucas asked.

Kali shrugged, looking worried. “We don’t know.”

Suddenly, El leapt to her feet in the practice room, screaming in frustration and ripping off the blindfold, throwing it to the ground. They all jumped as she rushed out, her face furious. “I can’t *find him!*” she screamed.

They stared at her, horrified. “Are you saying he’s-” Lucas asked,

slowly standing.

“No!” El said, turning on him. “No, he’s not *dead*, he can’t be!”

“El-” Will started.

“If he was dead,” El said, “I would *know*. I’d see his body.” None of them dared to ask how she knew this. “I could see him a little, he looked *hurt*, but when I tried to track him, he just... flickered out. It was like he wasn’t *there*.”

“What does *that* mean?” Max asked.

“I don’t *know*!” El yelled, kicking the bookshelf in frustration. “I don’t *know*!”

“El...?”

They all whipped around to see Nancy struggle to sit up. Jonathan rushed forwards, helping her stand.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked carefully.

Nancy glanced around at everyone, and El rushed forwards, stopping just short of her. “Where’s Mike?” she asked, terrified.

“El, sweetie,” Joyce said carefully, “You’re going to need to calm down. Nancy just woke up-”

“He’s not here?” Nancy asked, eyes wide. When El shook her head, Nancy started shaking, backing up a little and staring up at Jonathan and Steve. “They got him.” she said. “They got *him* and I failed...”

“What are you *talking about*?” El asked.

The teens glanced at each other, and then Nancy started crying, moving to sit back on the table. And then, slowly, she held out her hand, letting flames burst to life, levitated just above her palm. They all stared, and then Lucas said, “You control fire.”

Nancy shook her head slightly, before saying, “Heat. I control heat. Fire’s just the easiest use of that. I can cause explosions, too.” She

took a deep breath, and then said, "I'm your Mystery Girl."

There was a long silence, before she said, "Mike found out. He saw me and he got mad and we were fighting and... I was an *idiot*..."

"But you can't fly?" Max asked.

Nancy turned to her, confused. "What?"

"You could jump really high." Max said. "Does that mean you've got two-"

"Oh, uh, that was me." Steve admitted, glancing towards Nancy. "When she would go out, I'd stay nearby and mess with her gravity to get her out of places."

"I could hack into the Lab's computers, figure out where they were." Jonathan said quietly. "What buildings were targets, when it would be best to..."

"So," Joyce said, sending Jonathan a pointed look, "You're all in on this?"

They nodded a little.

"That doesn't matter." El interrupted, moving back in front of Nancy. "What happened to Mike?"

Nancy was suddenly crying again, and she said, "El, I'm so sorry-"

"Where *is* Mike?"

Nancy stared at her, and then she said, "The Lab got to him."

There was almost a full minute of silence, and then El screamed. Books flew off of the shelf, crashing to the ground, as she yelled, "*No! You're lying! You're lying!*"

"El!" Hopper ran forwards, grabbing gently onto her arm. She shoved herself away, backing up and screaming. It took a minute for Hopper to finally calm her down enough to hug her, and then El had buried her head in his chest, screaming and sobbing.

She wasn't the only one taking this badly. Will slowly backed up, before throwing his arms around the person who happened to be closest- Dustin- and sobbing. Kali stared for a second, before dropping to the ground, her face going blank. Slowly, Lucas moved over to Erica. "Hey, go hide in the bathroom for a bit." he muttered. "Keep trying to call Mom and Dad."

Normally, Erica would have protested, would have tried to include herself. But right now, she simply nodded and rushed away, locking herself in the bathroom, far away from everyone else.

"They came here for me." Nancy said, curling up. "It had to be me, they were after me but I burned enough of them that they stopped coming, but I got knocked out, and they couldn't get to me, but Mike..." She suddenly was bawling. "Mike is *gone* and it's *my fault*!"

"He's not *gone*." Lucas said, looking around to the others. "He's not *gone*, we're gonna get him back, like we got Will."

"Yeah- yeah." Dustin said. "We just need to find out where he is."

"If we could hack into the government servers, we might be able to find a general area." Hopper said, as El slowly started to quiet her cries.

"We need more than a general area!" Nancy asked. "Who knows what they're *doing* to him!"

"Do you know anything about where they might have taken him?" Will asked quietly, slowly pulling away.

Nancy shook her head, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "N-no. They just rushed in and all I could do was try and fight them. Maybe we could try and track their car- they had to have a car, right?"

"We need to find out where their headquarters are!" Lucas said. "That's where they'll have taken Mike!"

"The one out of town hasn't been rebuilt." Jonathan said.

"There was one," Joyce said, turning to Hopper, "That they tried to take us to, when they first asked us..."

"I checked that one when I adopted the girls." Hopper said. "Burned down."

Nancy blinked. "That... that one wasn't me."

"No, apparently someone who worked there had some enemies in a shady organization." Hopper said.

"Wait!" Everyone turned to look at Max, who had just leapt to her feet. She turned to Dustin, a light in her eyes. "We know! *We know!*" Dustin stared at her, as she turned to Lucas, trying to communicate to him, before turning towards Will. "We *know*. The video."

The boys gaped. "You're *right!*" Will said.

"We can get to Mike!" Dustin added.

"What are you talking about? What video?" Hopper asked.

El, however, pulled away, turning to her friends. "You can find him?"

"I completely forgot about the video." Lucas said, as the four kids rushed to the supercomputer, and everyone jumped up to follow, El pushing her way to the front. "With all this crazy shit going on-"

"But it could be connected." Max said.

"It has to be, right?" Will said.

"Slow down." Joyce said. "What's going on?"

The kids glanced at each other, and as Dustin started loading the video, Max said, "We received a... distress call. Email."

"A Distress Call?" Kali asked, as El looked up, shocked.

"From more powered children." Lucas said.

"How did they get your email?" Hopper asked.

Max laughed nervously. "Doesn't matter. What matters is we were going to show Mike when he got- when he got back. He needed to see it first."

“Why?” Nancy asked.

They all glanced to each other, as Max said, “Well... You’ll see. Dustin, play it.”

As Dustin loaded up the video, El said, “Max...”

“Just watch it.”

The video loaded.

And they all jumped back, some letting out startled yells.

Because Mike was on the screen.

Dustin paused the video when he saw all the noise, and as everyone started yelling questions, Lucas managed to hold up his hands and quiet them down.

“How did they get him on camera?” Steve asked.

“When did you get this?” Kali asked.

“We got this right after you went out.” Max said.

“So it’s *not* Mike?” Nancy asked. “Cause they wouldn’t have had time...”

“Why’s he got glasses?” Joyce asked.

The kids glanced to each other, and then Dustin pressed play.

The boy who looked exactly like Mike stared at the camera for a second, blinking and staring, before he broke into a wide, forced grin and waved, adjusting his glasses with his other hand.

“Hi, assholes!” he said, in a very loud voice. “Name’s Richie Tozier!”

God, he even *sounded* like Mike.

They heard a sigh from behind camera, and a girl’s voice say, “For the love of God-”

"Fine, fine." the boy rolled his eyes. "Okay, so, we're *pretty* sure you're legit. We looked you up and you seem to be... real people who can help us." his voice lowered a little at that, and his smile flickered.

El was staring intently at him, eyes narrowed. As he paused for a breath, she whispered, "It's not Mike."

Before anyone could respond to her, the boy on camera said, "Well, uh, we are in... in need of assistance. See, from what we can gather, you guys once blew up a laboratory for the so-called 'Department of Energy.' So we can assume you don't like them that much. Well... well, they're here. With us."

They stared in horror, as he continued, taking in a sharp breath and finally dropping his smile. "We've been in hiding for two weeks, but we can't get out of town, they keep *finding* us. They found us at the Well House, at the Underground Clubhouse, at the Hanlon's... we thought we could deal with them, we've dealt with..."

His face darkened, and he said, "We've dealt with *much* worse. We thought, if we could handle *IT*, we could handle..." He paused, and then sighed. "But... but... God, can we start this over?"

Another voice sounded from behind the camera. "J-j-just keep g-going."

"Whatever you say." Richie sighed, and then he looked at the camera again, and his voice started leaking a soft desperation. "They hurt Bev, Bill and Mike-" They all jumped at the name, but it was probably a different Mike, they guessed- "They've got eyes everywhere, and... they took our friends."

He pushed his glasses up again, turning to look at the ground. "They took our Stan. They took our Ben. They... They took our Eddie. They took our friends and they could be doing *anything* to them..."

He lowered his hand, gripping onto something off-camera, his face going pale. "That Lab is *evil*. They set up camp just outside of town and our friends are so close but so *far*... we have to get them out but we're injured, we can't do it alone. So... when I found out who you were... who you *are*... we decided to call for backup. We... we need

your help. Please.”

Richie glanced to the ground again, and then said, “We’re in Derry, Maine. Please help.”

The video ended, and they all stared at each other.

“Why does he look like Mike?” Steve asked.

“Are we sure we can trust this?” Jonathan asked.

“Have any of them been to the Lab before?” Kali asked, narrowing her eyes. “What do they-”

Suddenly, Nancy slammed her hands on the keyboard, and they all jumped, turning to her.

“Alright, kids,” Nancy said, a determination growing in her voice, “We’re going on a field trip.”

They had a long discussion after that on who should stay and who should go. Nancy got into an argument with Joyce and Hopper, because she thought it would be best if they stayed in town with Erica, while she, Jonathan, Steve and Kali took the others. The Party refused to stay, but they still needed someone to watch the town-and, plus, someone would have to explain the situation to the Sinclairs once they arrived. They finally managed to reach an agreement- the adults would stay for a while, but follow them to Maine if anything happened, or if too much time passed.

“We’ll keep in touch.” Jonathan promised, as he and Will hugged their Mom tight. El ran over to hug Hopper, too, and she was joined by Kali very fast. Lucas said a long goodbye to his sister, too, promising her that he’d be safe and she’d be alright.

And then they were off.

Nancy managed to rent two large vans in town, though she kept her head down and made everyone wait in the woods until she had them. “We’ll have two adults per van, the rest of you will have to split.” she

said.

“Are we really doing this?” Dustin asked cautiously.

They all turned to each other, and nodded. Though they all understood, El was the first one to speak.

“We’re going to save Mike.” she said. “We’re going to Derry, Maine.”

22. Derry is a bit more complicated than you'd imagine

Notes for the Chapter:

Posting this a bit early bc I have a performance tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Derry is a bit more complicated than you'd imagine

"I got a reply." Richie said.

The three other teens shot up, staring at him expectantly. Bev was halfway through re-applying bandages to her waist, while Mike was trying to help Bill walk on his bad foot.

"What did they say?" Bev asked cautiously, running a hand through her shoulder-length red hair.

"It was real short. Zoomer just said they're coming." Richie said. He seemed distracted, twitching his hands a little and staring at the ground.

"Thank God." Mike said, as Bev let out a small cry.

Bill, meanwhile, watched Richie. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it's just... nothing. I'm... I'm worried about the others."

They all fell silent, nodding. "We're a-a-all worried." Bill said.

"What if these guys can't help us?" Richie asked. "What if they fail?"

The kids all looked to each other, and Bev said, "Well, we killed IT. How hard could dismantling an organization be?"

She'd said that before, only two weeks before, when they started to get worried over the new lab in town. They'd laughed then, laughed

to hide the pain of their past, their fear of the future.

None of them laughed now.

“We are so fucked.” Eddie said in a very small voice.

The boys weren’t sure why they were together. They’d been apart for their entire capture, but now they had just been thrown into a room together, and none of the workers said anything to them about why. They were huddled on the floor now, hugging and trying to keep themselves from crying.

“Maybe we can still escape.” Ben said softly. “Now that we’re together. Stan, can you-”

Stan shook his head. “They’ve got cameras everywhere. They’ll know where we are anywhere we go. We try to get out the doors, we’ll have to scale the fence, which is electrocuted.”

“I might be able to get over.” Eddie said, glancing down at his hands. “We haven’t tried electrocuting me before.”

“Stan, what about you? Can’t you make it over?” Ben asked.

Stan bit his lip. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they did something to me. You can’t see it under the shirt but they strapped something to my back. My wings are-”

Suddenly, they all heard noises outside, sounding like several people moving down the hall. Ben instantly shrank back, hiding behind Stan, who let out a gasp and moved his arm to shield Eddie. Eddie normally would have complained, saying something about how he could take care of himself, but right now he just gripped onto Stan’s arm and peered hesitantly at the door, waiting for someone to open it.

Nobody did. Instead, they heard a door open in the room beside

them. They followed the sound, and all noticed, around the same time, a connecting door on the side of the wall, leading to the other area. They waited until after they heard the door in the hall close again and the footsteps clear out before they dared speak again.

“What do you think happened?” Eddie asked.

“What do you think is *in there*?” Ben added.

“Do you think someone’s still there?” Stan said.

They all stared at each other, each knowing the only way to find out.

Finally, Eddie said, “If Bill and Bev were here, they’d already be in that room.”

They all nodded, and Eddie stood up first, slowly approaching the room as Stan and Ben watched, preparing to either follow or drag him back. Eddie finally reached the door, and as he grabbed the handle, he paused. Finally, he took a deep breath, and opened the door.

He stared into the room, and his eyes went wide. He stepped in a bit, and then the boys could hear him yell.

“Holy shit! Holy shit, *Richie!*”

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so here's the Dealio for Part III.

- Part III, Chapter One will be posted on Monday.
- It will be LONG. Be prepared.
- Not sure what Losers Club ships I'll have, we'll see how it goes. Might just be friendship throughout, idk.
- It picks up RIGHT where Part II ends. No time skips, yay!
- I'm probably going to have to up the warnings for

"Graphic Depictions of Violence." It won't get too gory (I'm not good at writing gore), but it will be violent, so, head's up.

- The Richie/Mike thing will be addressed, but not immediately.

- Speaking of which, I've decided that since there are two Mikes, when there's a Party Member POV, Mike Hanlon will be referred to by his last name and Mike Wheeler by his first, and vice-versa for Losers POV. It might get confusing, but it's the best I could do lol.

- I can't wait to see y'all for Part III!

Here's the link: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/14340432/chapters/33096699>

~ Midas